138 Pages

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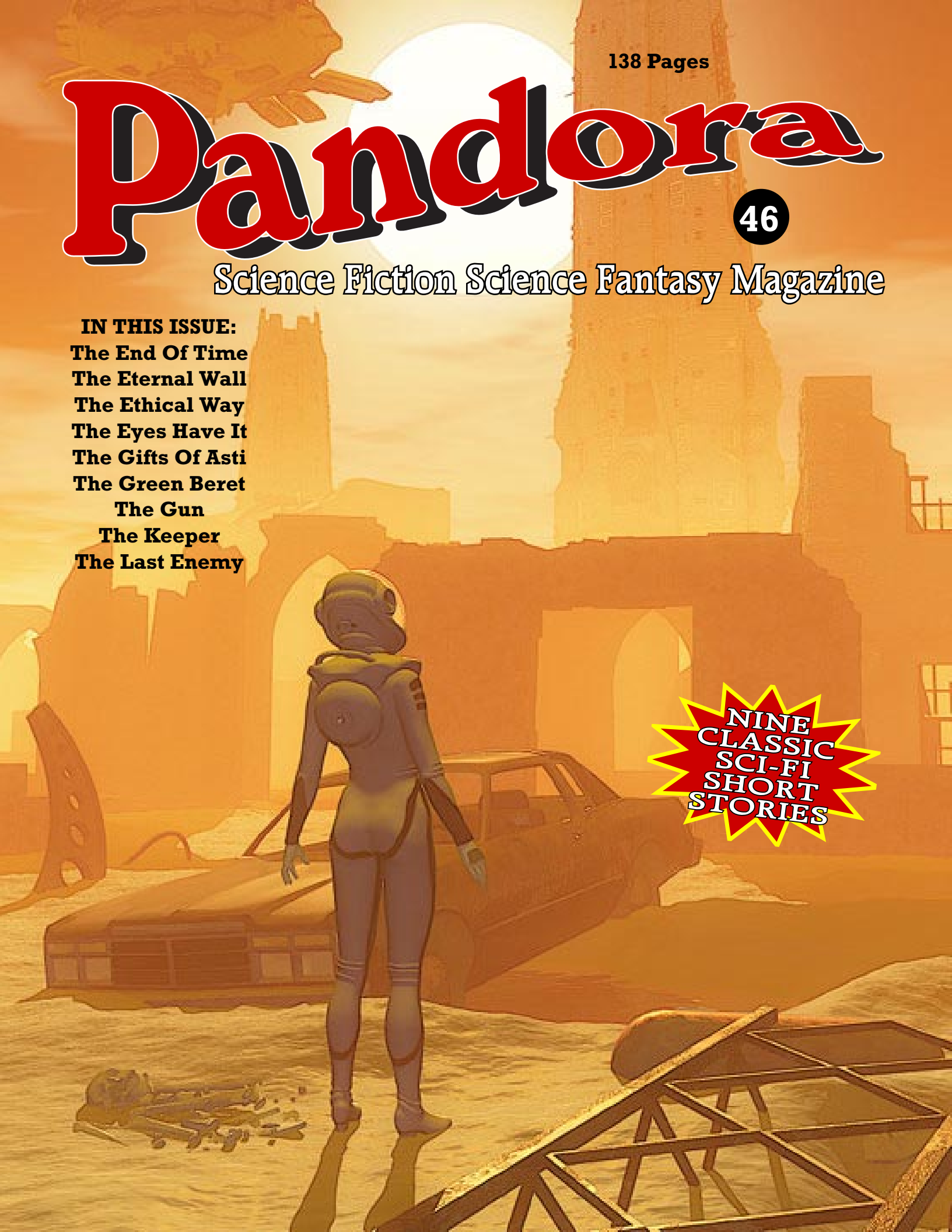
Science Fiction Science Fantasy Magazine



IN THIS ISSUE:

The End Of Time
The Eternal Wall
The Ethical Way
The Eyes Have It
The Gifts Of Asti
The Green Beret
The Gun
The Keeper
The Last Enemy

NINE CLASSIC SCI-FI SHORT STORIES

Pandora

Science Fiction Science Fantasy Magazine

Kerson Publishing Company • 6460-65 Convoy Court • San Diego, California 92117

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Published in the United States of America

Kerson Publishing Company
6460-65 Convoy Court
San Diego, California 92117-2312

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THE END OF TIME

By millions of millions the creatures of earth slow and drop when their time-sense is mysteriously paralyzed.]

"There is no doubt of it!" The little chemist pushed steel-bowed spectacles up on his high forehead and peered at his dinner guest with excited blue eyes. "Time will come to an end at six o'clock this morning."

Jack Baron, young radio engineer at the Rothafel Radio laboratories, and protégé of Dr. Manthis, his host, laughed heartily.

"What a yarn you spin, Doctor," he said. "Write it for the movies."

"But it's true," insisted the older man. "Something is paralyzing our time-sense. The final stroke will occur about daybreak."

"Bosh! You mean the earth will stop rotating, the stars blink out?"

"Not at all. Such things have nothing to do with time. You may know your short waves, but your general education has been sadly neglected." The scientist picked up a weighty volume. "Maybe this will explain what I mean. It's from Immanuel Kant's 'Critique of Pure Reason.' Listen:

'Time is not something which subsists of itself, or which inheres in things as an objective determination, and therefore, remains, when abstraction is made of the subjective conditions of the intuition of things. For in the former case it would be something real, yet without presenting to any power of perception any real object. In the latter case, as an order of determination inherent in things themselves, it could not be antecedent to things, as their condition, nor discerned or intuited by means of synthetical propositions a priori. But all this is quite possible when we regard time as merely the subjective condition under which all our intuitions take place.'

"There. Does that make it clear?"

"Clear as mud," grinned Baron. "Kant is too deep for me."

"I'll give you another proof," snapped Manthis. "Look at your watch."

The other drew out his timepiece. Slowly his face sobered.

"Why, I can't see the second hand," he exclaimed. "It's just a blur!"

"Exactly! Now look at the minute hand. Can you see it move?"

"Yes, quite clearly."

"What time is it?"

"Half past one. Great Scott! So that's why you spun that yarn." Baron hoisted his six feet one out of the easy chair. "It's way past your bedtime. Didn't mean to keep you up." He stared again at his watch as if it had betrayed him. "It seems we just finished dinner. I must have dozed off...."

"Nonsense," sniffed Manthis. "You arrived at eight o'clock—an hour late. You and I and my daughter had dinner. Then the two of us came in here. We smoked a cigarette or two. Now it's half-past one. Do you need more proof?"

"Your theory's all wet somewhere," the younger man protested with a shaky laugh. "If my watch isn't broken, time must be speeding up, not stopping."

"That comes from depending on your senses instead of your intelligence. Think a minute. If the watch seems running double speed that would indicate that your perception of its movements had slowed down fifty per cent."

Baron sank back into his chair, leaned forward and gripped his curly black hair with trembling fingers. He felt dizzy and befuddled.

"June," called the doctor. Then to the agitated youth he added: "Watch my daughter when she comes in if you still think I'm crazy."

As he spoke the door flew open and a slim, golden-haired girl shot into the room like a motion picture character in one of those comedies which is run double speed. Jack's eyes could hardly follow her movements.

She came behind her father and threw one slim arm about his shoulders. She spoke, but her usually throaty voice was only a high-pitched squeak.

"Can't understand you, dear," interrupted her father. "Write it down."

"June is using a drug which I prepared to keep her time sense normal," Manthis explained as the girl's pen raced over a pad. "That's why she disappeared after dinner. I wanted you to get the full effect. Now read this."

"The deadline is approaching," the girl's message read. "You'd better take your injection now. It is 2:30 A.M."

"All right, prepare the hypodermics," directed the chemist. He had to repeat this in a falsetto voice before June understood. "Make one for Jack too."

June went out at express-train speed.

Baron glanced at his watch again. The minute hand was moving with the speed at which the second hand usually traveled. Three fifteen already!

When he looked up June was in the room again with two hypodermic needles. Quickly she removed her father's coat and made the injection.

"Let her fix you up too, boy, unless you want to become a graven image," commanded Manthis. His voice, which started at the ordinary pitch, went up like a siren at the end as the drug took effect. Dazedly Jack held out his arm.

The sting of the needle was followed by a roaring in his ears like a hundred Niagaras. The room seemed to pitch and quiver. Staring down at the watch he still clutched, Jack saw the hands slow down and at last resume their accustomed

pace. Gradually the unpleasant sensations died away.

"That was a close shave," commented the doctor, drawing a long breath. "I wouldn't have waited so long, except that I wanted to experience the sensation of coming back from the edge of the infinite. Not very nice! Like being pulled out of a whirlpool. It's 4:30 now. Took us an hour to return to normal, although it seemed only minutes. We have an hour and a half before the end. June, have you noticed anything unusual on the streets?"

"Yes," whispered his daughter, her usually piquant face pinched and white. "I've been watching from the balcony. It's dreadful. The people creep about like things in a nightmare."

Manthis tried to reassure her. On his face was a great sadness which was, however, overshadowed by a greater scientific curiosity.

"There's nothing we can do for them now," he said. "But we must learn all we can. Let's go down and watch the city die."

They descended in an automatic elevator and hurried through the hotel lobby. The lights of Fifth Avenue gleamed as brightly as ever. The streets near the lower end of Central Park still were crowded. But such crowds! They moved with infinite langour. Each step required many seconds.

Yet the people apparently did not know that anything unusual was happening. Many perhaps were puzzled because their watches seemed to be misbehaving but this did not stop their conversation as they traveled home from theaters or night clubs. Two white-haired men passed by, engaged in a discussion of business affairs. Their voices were pitched so low that they were almost inaudible to the trio of watchers, while their gestures looked like the slow waving of the antennae of deep sea plants.

"My God, man!" cried Baron, at last awakening from his horror-stricken silence. "Why didn't you warn the world? This is criminal. If what you say is true, all these people will become rooted in their tracks at six o'clock like—like characters from 'The Sleeping Beauty.'"

"I only discovered the danger a week ago while working out a chemical formula." Manthis' eyes showed the strain he was enduring. "It was a very delicate piece of work having to do with experiments I am making on chlorophyl—quick adjustments, you know. I'd done the thing before many times, but last week I couldn't mix the ingredients fast enough to get the necessary reaction. Puzzled, I made further experiments. The result was that I discovered my perception of time was slowing down. I tested June and found the same thing. There was but one conclusion."

"But the drug we are using. How did you hit on that?"

"I recalled that such drugs as hashish greatly speed up the time sense. An addict is able to review his entire past life or plan an elaborate crime between two heartbeats. So I collected a small supply of the stuff."

"But hashish in large doses is deadly, and I've heard that users of it sooner or later develop homicidal mania—run amuck as they say in India."

"True enough," admitted the chemist, "but Andrev, the Russian, you know, recently worked out a formula to neutralize the deadly effects of the drug but retain its time-expanding effect for medical purposes. I've added that to the pure drug. There isn't enough of it in New York to keep all these people normal for five minutes. Why should I have frightened the poor things?"

He relapsed into silence and the others found no heart to ask further questions as they watched the coming of the end of a world. The procession of passers-by had thinned somewhat by now. The street lights had grown dim. There was a look of increasing puzzlement on the faces of the people who remained. Something was wrong. They knew not what.

Floating along the sidewalk like a figure in a slow motion picture came a tiny tot of three. She was sobbing. Great tears formed with painful slowness and slid down her flushed cheeks.

"She's lost," exclaimed June. "Here, darling, I'll find your mama."

She picked up the child and looked up and down the street. The mother was not in sight. Automatically she turned to a policeman who stood nearby.

"Officer," she said quickly, "this girl is lost. Will you...?"

She stiffened in dismay. The policeman was staring through her as if his eyes had not registered her approach. Slowly his gaze came into focus. A puzzled look came over his Irish face. He spoke. It was only a blurred rumble.

"What can I do for her, Father?" June cried, turning away from the officer in despair. "She's dying. See? Couldn't we give her some of the drug?"

"There's only enough for us," her father replied firmly.

"But she'll be quite dead in an hour!"

"I'm not so sure of that. Perhaps only in a state resembling catalepsy. We must wait. Jack, take her into the lobby. Put her on a sofa there."

Dawn was paling the blue-black sky as the radio engineer returned. The street lights fluttered fitfully and at last died. The streets had become deserted although groups still eddied slowly about the subway kiosks.

"Five forty-five," whispered Manthis. "The end should come any moment."

As he spoke a white-garbed street sweeper, who had been leaning on his broom at the curb ever since the onlookers had reached the sidewalk, decided to move on at last. With infinite slowness his foot came up. He poised, swung forward, then, the universal paralysis overcoming him, remained in a strangely ludicrous position for a moment before crashing downward on his face.

As far as they could see in the semi-darkness, others were falling. A few, balanced with feet wide apart, remained standing like statues. Those who collapsed writhed slowly a time or two and were still.

After the thudding of the bodies had

ended the silence became ghastly. Not an awakening bird twittered in the trees of Central Park. Not a sheep bleated in the inclosure. Except for their own breathing and the sighing of the wind, not a sound! Then a faraway clock boomed six notes. The noise made them start and turn pale faces toward each other.

"Come," said the doctor heavily. "It's all over. We might as well go up. We'll have to walk. All power will be off. Twenty stories!"

The lobby of the Hotel Atchison, on the roof of which the penthouse apartment was located, was empty now except for a few clerks and bellboys. These sat with bowed heads before their grills or on their benches as if they had merely succumbed to the unpardonable sin of sleeping on duty. But they did not breathe.

June clung to her father's arm as they crossed noiselessly over the heavy carpet.

"The city will be a charnel house when these bodies start to decompose." Baron hesitated. "Shouldn't we get out of town while there is a chance?"

Manthis shook his head. "No. I'm convinced these people aren't dead. They're simply outside of time. Change cannot affect them. If I'm not mistaken they will remain just the same indefinitely."

"But there will be fires throughout the city."

"Not many. The electricity is off. The day is warm so no furnaces are going. Not even a rat is left to nibble matches, for the animals must be affected in the same way that humans are. The world is asleep."

After mounting interminable stairs they regained the apartment and went out on the balcony. It was full daylight now but not a smoke-plume trailed from tall chimneys. Not a bird was on the wing. Elevated trains stood on their tracks, passengers and guards asleep inside.

"I still don't understand," muttered Baron. "The sun comes up. The wind blows. How can that be if there is no time? Might this not be some plague?"

"In a way you are right, boy. It is a plague which has paralyzed man's sense of time. You have become involved by not remembering Kant's axiom that time is purely subjective. It exists in the mind only. It and space are the only ideas inherently in our brains. They allow us to conduct ourselves among a vast collection of things-in-themselves which time does not affect."

"But—"

"Wait a moment. Granting that time is in the mind rather than in the outside world, what will happen if the time-sense is paralyzed? Won't the effect be similar to hypnosis whereby a man is reduced to a cataleptic state? The thought chain which usually passes ceaselessly through the brain is halted."

Seeing that the engineer still looked puzzled, June interposed:

"It's something like enchantment," she explained. "The old legends are full of it—the Sleeping Beauty, Brunhilde, Rip Van Winkle. I am convinced that in

ancient times a few persons knew how to draw a fairy ring about those they wished to injure or protect, placing them thus outside the reach of time and change. This has now happened the world over, perhaps through some drift in the ether or germ in the brain. That is what we must find out so we can solve the mystery and take steps to reawaken the world—"

"Perhaps this will help," interrupted Manthis in his turn. "As you know, all the great scientists—Einstein, Jeans, Pavlov—are convinced that everything in the universe is a form of vibration. Even thought, they believe, operates somewhat like a very short radio wave. What if some agency, either inside or outside the universe, began interfering on the thought-wave channel?"

"Granting your supposition,"—Jack was on his own ground now—"transmission would be impossible on that channel."

"Exactly! Well, that's what I am convinced is taking place. I'm a chemist, not an engineer. I've given you the lead. You'll have to do the rest. Do you think you might locate such interference?"

"Possibly. I'll do my best."

"Fine! Of course, if it is coming from outside the stratosphere as the cosmic rays do, there is no hope. But if someone is broadcasting such a devilish wave from an earthly station we may have a chance to stop it.

"Now, Baron, my boy," he continued, dropping into a more jovial tone and leading his friend into the laboratory, "you'll have to get busy if you intend to keep us ticking. This equipment is at your disposal." He waved toward a newly installed short wave radio transmitter. "Here are storage batteries, all charged." He opened another door. "I have a five kilowatt generator installed here. It is operated by a gasoline engine. If you need other equipment you can raid the Rothafel plant."

Returning to the main laboratory he indicated the work table set close to a great double window overlooking Central Park.

"Couldn't ask for anything better, could you?" he smiled. "Plenty of light and air and a view of the city. Look, you can even see those poor devils lying around the subway kiosk." His face became bleak. Then he shrugged and tried to throw off his depression. "June and I will help you as much as we can. We can raid stores for provisions and hashish. Now let's have breakfast."

The next few days were filled with unending labor for the temporal castaways. From daybreak until far into the night, with radio receivers clamped over their ears, the three twisted dials, adjusted rheostats and listened in on long and short wave bands. But the ether, which once had pulsated with music and friendly voices, now was silent, except for static.

"Makes me think of Sunday mornings when I was a boy," Manthis once commented. "Only this is more quiet. It gives me the jitters." There was a note of hysteria in his voice.

When the doctor's nerves began to quiver in that manner, Baron always in-

sisted that they all rest. During such recesses they ate, played cards and helped June with the housework. The younger man was continually amazed by the calmness with which the girl faced their desperate situation. Clad in a blue smock which brought out the color of her eyes, she flitted about the apartment, manufacturing delicious meals out of canned goods and always having a cheery word when the others became discouraged. Yet she never would look out the window.

"I can't bear to see those poor souls lying about like rag dolls," she explained. "The only thing that keeps me sane is the hope that we may reawaken them."

It was on the evening of the third day that Baron lifted the headset from his burning ears and admitted failure.

"We've explored everything but the super-short waves," he sighed. "I'll have to get equipment from the laboratories before we start on those."

June nodded from where she perched on a high stool across the table. But Manthis did not hear. He was making delicate adjustments on his receiving set and listening with rapt attention.

"I've got something," he cried. "Jack. June. Plug in on my panel. Someone is talking. It's very loud. Must be close."

Instantly the others did as he ordered, but were able to catch only the last inflections of a ringing voice. Then silence settled once more.

"What did he say," the youngsters cried in one breath.

"Couldn't understand. Some foreign language." The chemist was furious with disappointment. "But I'd recognize that voice among a thousand. We must get in touch with him. Perhaps he can help us. God knows we need assistance. Quick, Jack. You're an expert. See if you can pick up a reply."

Baron leaned over his instruments, heart thumping. The dreadful loneliness against which he had been fighting was broken. Others were alive!

Minutes passed and the evening light died away. They were too excited to strike a light. Shadows crept out of the corners and surrounded them. At last a faint voice grew in their ears. But again the words were unintelligible.

"Sounds a little like Greek," puzzled the girl, "but it isn't."

Baron adjusted the direction finder and made scribbled calculations.

"Coming from the southeast and far away," he breathed.

"I caught a word then," gasped the doctor. "'Ganja,' it was."

"What does that tell us?" snapped Jack, his nerves jumping.

"Ganja is the Hindu word for hashish, that's all. My Lord, man, don't you understand? The station is in India. Those who operate it are using Andrev's solution as we are. I—"

"Listen!" shouted Jack.

There was a grinding and clashing in the receivers. Then a new voice, harsh and strained with excitement, almost burst their eardrums.

"Beware! Beware!" it screamed. "Do not trust him. He is a devil and has

put the world asleep. His mind is rotten with hashish. He is a demon from—" Then came a dull, crunching sound. The voice screamed and died away.

In the darkened laboratory the faces of the three listeners stood out like ovals of white cardboard.

"What do you make of that?" stammered Baron at last.

"It looks as if the only persons alive, in New York at least, are hashish addicts—the most debased and murderous of drug fiends." The doctor stopped, his eyes dilating with horror. June crept close to him and threw an arm around his shaking shoulders. "Can't you see? Their time-sense expanded too. Like us they were unaffected. But unlike us they use the pure drug. Hashish smokers are without exception homicidal maniacs, vicious criminals. God!"

"Are they responsible for the end of time?" queried Jack.

"I don't know. Perhaps some master mind among them is back of it—some engineering wizard who has succumbed to the drug so recently, or who has such a strong constitution that his intelligence has not been destroyed."

The little doctor dragged off his headset, disarranging his sparse gray hair. His face was tired and worn but his jaw thrust forward pugnaciously.

"We're making headway," he cried. "We know the probable author of the catastrophe is a drug addict and that he is located nearby. We know he has no scruples, for the man who warned us undoubtedly was killed. And I'm convinced those extremely short wave bands hold the secret. Let's knock off for the day. We look like ghosts. To-morrow morning you and June get what equipment you need from across the river. I'll stay here on guard. You'd better raid a drug-store and get some more of our life-saver, too. It's listed under Cannabis Indica."

The next morning dawned clear and cold. It was early October and there was a chill in the apartment. Baron swung his legs over the edge of the davenport in the living room and stared out at the frost-covered trees of Central Park. The leaves were falling before the brisk wind and forming little eddying mounds over the forms of those lying about the streets. Jack shivered at the thought of the millions and millions of victims of the disaster who littered the Earth. They seemed to accuse him of still being alive. Well, if Manthis was right, perhaps all could be revived before winter set in.

June was singing as he and the doctor came to breakfast. Apparently she wished to forget the events of the previous night, so they laughed and joked as though they intended to go on a picnic rather than across a dead city.

The hotel lobby was as they last had seen it when they descended. The bellboys still nodded on their benches. A travelling salesman was hunched over a week-old Times as if he would awake in a few minutes, glance about guiltily and resume his reading. The child they had rescued still lay on the divan. Her golden hair framed her cheeks like a halo. One arm was thrown above her head. She seemed ready to awake,

though she had not breathed for days.

"It all makes me feel so lonely," whispered June, clinging to the engineer's arm. "I want to cry—or whistle to keep up my courage."

"Don't worry," Jack replied softly, patting her hand and speaking with more assurance than he felt. "We'll find a way out."

She squeezed his arm and smiled at him with new courage. For months, in fact ever since his first visit to the Manthis apartment, Baron had admired the doctor's charming daughter. Although nothing had been said of love between them they often had gone to a dance or the theater together, while a firm friendship had been cemented. Now their closer association and the unflinching bravery which she showed was ripening this into a stronger bond.

They went out into the crisp morning, stepped across the body of a street sweeper who lay in the gutter, and entered the doctor's automobile. Through the silent city they drove, Baron watching carefully to avoid striking stalled cars or grotesquely sprawling bodies.

There was a tangle of wrecked automobiles in the center of the Queensboro Bridge and they were forced to push them apart to get through. While they were engaged in this arduous work, a drifting ferry bumped into a pier, shaking the dreaming captain into a semblance of life at the wheel.

"I used to like fairy tales," moaned June. "They're dreadful, really."

She clung to him like a frightened child. He drew her close and kissed her.

"I love you, June," he whispered, as though fearful that the sleeping drivers of the tangled cars might overhear. "Don't be afraid."

"I'm not—now," she smiled through eyes filled with tears. "I've loved you for months, Jack. Whatever happens, we have each other."

He helped her back into the car and drove on in silence. At last the Rothafel plant gloomed before them, forbidding as an Egyptian tomb. With a feeling that he was entering some forbidden precinct, Jack led the way to his office. Somehow, without its usual bustle and bright lights, it seemed alien.

Once inside he forgot his hesitation and set about collecting equipment—queerly shaped neon tubes, reflectors, coils, electrodes. Soon there was a pile of material glinting on top of his desk.

They were exploring a deep cabinet with the aid of a flashlight when a strange clicking sound made them whirl simultaneously. In a corner of the room a deeper blot of shadow caught their eyes. Jack snapped on the flash. In the small circle of light a long, cadaverous face appeared. Thin lips were drawn back over wide-spaced yellow teeth. Black eyes stared unwinkingly into the light. The flash wavered as the engineer tried to get his nerves under control.

"It's nothing," he assured the trembling girl. "A night watchman caught as he was making his rounds, probably. Don't get excited." He wet his lips.

"He's alive!" screamed June. "The eyelids! They moved!"

"Yes, I'm alive," boomed a hoarse voice. "I thought I was the only man God had spared. Pardon me for frightening you. I was so thunderstruck...."

The stranger stepped forward. He was dressed in a long black topcoat, high collar and string tie. The clicking noise was explained when he rubbed his long white hands together, making the knuckles pop like tiny firecrackers.

"Ivan Solinski, at your service." He smiled with what evidently was intended to be warmth, again showing those rows of teeth like picket fences. "I suppose we're all here on the same mission: to find a solution for the mystery of the world's paralysis." The apparition lit a long and bloated cigarette and through the acrid smoke surveyed them quizzically.

"I'm Jack Baron, formerly on the staff here, and this is June Manthis, daughter of Dr. Frank Manthis, head of the chemical research department." The engineer winced as Solinski enfolded his hand in a clammy grip.

"Ah yes, I know the doctor by hearsay. A great scientist. He has a lovely daughter"—bowing deeply to June as he let his beady eyes wander over her face and figure. "Perhaps we can join forces, although I must admit I have abandoned hope. It is God's will." He rolled his eyes toward heaven, then riveted them once more upon June.

"Why, certainly." Jack was striving to overcome his growing dislike. "We'll be driving back in a few minutes. Would you care to come with us?"

"No." The pupilless eyes skittered toward Baron for a moment. "I know the doctor's address. I will come to visit you soon. Now I must be going." Solinski turned as if to depart, then strode to the desk and looked down at the mass of equipment. "Ah, super-short wave tubes, I see. Very clever." His dexterous fingers lingered over them a moment. Then he bowed and was gone.

The two remained staring at the empty doorway.

"I—I wish he'd been dead—sleeping," whispered June at last, twisting her handkerchief with trembling fingers. "He—I didn't like the way he kept looking at me."

"He seemed all right to me." Jack tried to forget his own prejudice. "He's willing to help us."

"Might he not be one of the hashish addicts? Those eyes—the pupils were mere pinpoints—and those evil-smelling cigarettes."

"Then why should he have offered to help?" puzzled Jack. "He could have killed us."

"Nevertheless I hope we've seen the last of him. Are you about through? Let's get out of this awful place. He looked like a mummy!"

They drove back to the apartment so completely preoccupied that both forgot to obtain the drug which the doctor had requested.

"Yes, I've heard of him," Manthis said after he had been informed of the encounter. "A naturalized Russian. Used to do quite a bit of valuable work in various fields of physics. But he was some sort of radical—seems to me an old-

fashioned anarchist—and not popular. He dropped out of sight several years ago. I presumed he was dead."

They soon had the new equipment installed and again began exploring the wave bands, beginning with the comparatively lengthy ones and working down into those only slightly longer than light. It was tedious work, but all were by now as adept as Jack in combing the ether and their task progressed rapidly. Despite the labor, however, nothing could be heard. There was only the universal, breathless silence. At times they moved to the commercial bands and tried to pick up the stations they had heard on the previous day, but even there they met with failure.

By the evening of the third day they had left the wave bands which could be measured in meters and were exploring those strange and almost wholly uncharted depths of the ether which must be calculated in centimeters. There at last luck favored them. It was Jack who caught a strange pulsating tone on the three-centimeter band. It rose and fell, rose and fell, then died away like the keening of a lost soul.

"Listen," he whispered. "Plug in here. I've found something."

June and the doctor followed his instructions. Delicately fingering the coils, Baron picked up the sound again, only to lose it. Then it came once more. This time he followed it as it changed to the five centimeter band. Back and forth it went as though weaving an intricate and devilish web.

"What do you make of it?" queried the doctor at last.

"Don't know." Jack bit his lips. "It's no natural phenomenon, I'll swear. Somebody is manipulating a broadcasting station of terrific power not far from here and playing with that wave as a helmsman brings a sailing ship into the wind and lets her pay off again."

"What do we do now?" The little chemist, finding his theory apparently confirmed, was at a loss. "Could we wreck that station?"

"Fat chance!" The engineer laughed bitterly as he reached for a cigarette. "Whoever has conceived that bit of hellishness is well guarded. The three of us wouldn't have a ghost of a show. What I can't understand is—"

"No use talking about theories now." Manthis sat down, crushed. Dropping his head in his bands, he pulled his few hairs as though that might drag out an idea. "What's to be done? Do you realise that we hold more responsibility than ever man has held before? Caesar! Napoleon! They were pikers. We have to save a world."

Silence greeted his outburst. The scratching of a match as June lit a cigarette sounded like an explosion. Then the smoke eddied undisturbed while the three stared vacantly into space, trying to think.

"Couldn't we"—the girl swallowed hesitantly as she realized her ignorance of radio engineering—"couldn't we interfere with that wave? Interfere with the wave which already is breaking up the thought waves. Cancel its power. Oh, Jack, you must know what I mean."

"With this dinky, five-kilowatt station? We couldn't reach Yonkers against the power they've got. By Jove!" He leaped to his feet as a new thought struck him. "Maybe we could just wake up New York. Get help from the police then! Smash that other station afterwards!"

"But we don't know whether interference would break the spell," interposed the practical doctor. "And it will take a lot of practise to follow that wave. It jumps back and forth like a grasshopper."

"And if we don't do it right the first time, whoever is operating that station will be down on us like a ton of brick," admitted Jack.

"Let's get the child we saved," suggested June. "We can bring her up here. Then we'll need only a little power, just enough to be effective in this room, to bring her to life if we can. They wouldn't hear our wave."

"Great!" Jack bent over and kissed her. "You're a real help. I'll be back in a minute." He dashed out. Soon they heard his step on the stairs and he reappeared, tenderly bearing his golden-haired burden.

"Now, June," he commanded briskly, "place her in a comfortable position on the work table while I get ready." He began arranging equipment and connecting it with the bank of storage batteries.

"Shall I adjust a headset for her?" asked the impatient doctor.

"Be yourself!" Jack placed a crooked vacuum tube near the child's head and clamped two flat electrodes on her temples. "This wave must act directly on the brain. The sense of hearing has nothing to do with it.

"All right, Sleeping Beauty." He stretched the kinks out of his aching back. "Let's see what we can do for you. Pardon me, Doctor, if I seemed rude. This is ticklish work. Pick up the outside wave for me. Thanks. Now I've got our dinky sending station set on the same wave length at a different frequency. It's adjusted so that as I keep in touch through this tuning coil, our wave will fluctuate over the same path as the other. It should take six or eight hours to overcome the effect on her, I judge. Here we go. June, you'd better get yourself and your dad some food. Doctor, you examine the kid from time to time. In an hour or so June can relieve me."

He pressed a switch. The tubes filled with a green glow.

Two hours passed, and the sun was sinking behind the trees of the park in a bloody haze when Jack at last signaled for June to handle the dials. For a time he guided her slim fingers. Then, as she caught the trick, he rose and stretched his cramped muscles.

"Don't lose the wave for a moment or we'll have to start all over again," he warned. "Now for dinner!"

She nodded and, frowning slightly, bent over the dials.

At that moment there came a heavy knock on the apartment door.

"Who's that?" gasped Manthis, his face turning grey.

"Probably Solinski," replied Jack,

feeling his spine crawl as he remembered the moldy Russian. "Fine time he chose for a visit."

"Shall I let him in?"

"Don't see what else there is to do."

"Good evening," cried their guest as Manthis opened the door. "Ah, Dr. Manthis, I believe. I have heard so much about your work." His hoarse yet ringing voice made the little man start violently and caused June to shake her head in annoyance as the sound interfered with the humming of the vagrant wave. "Sorry I could not come earlier." Solinski advanced into the laboratory, giving the effect of driving the chemist before him. "Trying to revive one of the sufferers, I see. May God aid you in this noble work."

He spread the tails of his long coat and sat down. As he talked his eyes flashed about the room, taking in every detail and at last fastening on June's fresh beauty like those of a vampire. "Not," he boomed as he lighted a cigarette, "not that I believe it possible—"

Catching an agonized glance from Jane, Jack interrupted:

"You'll have to speak softly, sir. This is ticklish work."

"I beg your pardon." The Russian lowered his voice so that it squeaked piercingly like a rusty hinge. He wrung his hands audibly.

"Perhaps we'd better move into the living room," suggested the doctor, hovering in the background. "There we can talk without interrupting."

Their guest unfolded joint by joint like a collapsible rule.

"Of course, if you think I'm spying," he grated.

"Not at all," protested Jack, although he longed to strike the brute across the face. "It's just that voices of certain pitches interfere. Surely you have seen radio operators go all to pieces when spoken to."

Ungraciously Solinski allowed himself to be ushered into the outer room. Once there he disposed his lean form on another chair, unctuously refused a highball, and, forgetting his momentary anger, soon was deep in a scientific discussion of the problems involved in revivifying the world.

He mentioned the nearby radio station but declared that he had been unable to locate it despite a careful search. Dismissing this he turned to other topics, displaying a vast knowledge of all departments of scientific achievement and, despite his depressing personality, holding his bearer's attention so closely they forgot the passage of time until the clock struck ten.

"Time for daily injection," said the doctor. "Do you use Andrev's solution too, sir?"

"Naturally," replied the other, lighting one cigarette from the butt of another.

Manthis hurried into the laboratory. A few moments later he reappeared in the doorway and called to Jack in an agitated voice. As the younger man joined him he closed the door and turned a white face to him.

"The drug is almost gone," Manthis said. "Didn't you obtain a new supply?"

"We—I forgot it," admitted Jack, feeling his own face grow pale. "The shock of running across Solinski at the laboratory upset me."

"Well, that's all right, then. It gave me a turn, but we have plenty of time." The doctor laughed shakily. "Run down to the nearest drug store. There should be a supply there. Better take a flashlight."

He pushed open the door, then shrank back. Leaning against the jamb was the Russian. His manner had changed subtly. His thin lips spread from ear to ear in a wolfish grin. His fingers clicked like castanets.

"Ah," he purred. "So you have used up the last of your solution?"

"What's that to you?" The doctor was gripped by cold unreasoning fear.

"Only that you will be unable to obtain more. Since my first meeting with your daughter I have had my men collect all the Cannabis Indica in the city."

"Your men!" Manthis was thunderstruck.

"Certainly, you old fool. Do you think I'm a bungling theorist like yourself? Who do you think is operating that short-wave station? I am. Who do you think put the world to sleep? I did. Who do you think will wake it? I will."

Solinski's figure appeared to expand. He took deep drafts from his cigarette. The smoke seemed to impel some terrific force into his gaunt frame.

"So it was your voice I heard!" cried Manthis bitterly. "And those awful tales about you were true. A hashish smoker! A person whose mind is rotting, in control of the world!" He seemed about to leap at the other, and his chubby figure, in that attitude, would have seemed ludicrous if it had not been tragic. "It shall not be!" he shouted.

"Now see here, Doctor"—Solinski assumed a friendly tone—"you're making a grave mistake. I have something to offer better than you ever dreamed of."

"What do you mean?"

"Just this. How would you like to be assistant to the King of the World?"

"Crazy already," sneered the doctor, squinting up at his tormentor.

"Crazy or not, when the world awakes I will be its king."

"Why, damn you, I thought you were an anarchist and wanted to do away with kings and governments," sputtered the little man.

Solinski burst into a gale of fiendish laughter.

"An anarchist is merely a capitalist without money or power," he quoted.

"What do you want of us?" demanded Manthis, playing for time.

"Very simple. This: I intend soon to begin awakening those who will serve me, first in New York and then throughout the world. When I have a skeleton government built up, I will withdraw the wave and allow the people to revive. Clever, isn't it? Especially for such a madman as you think me." He snapped his fingers and leered cunningly at them.

The doctor choked but Jack's hand on his arm steadied him.

"You have a very beautiful daughter," resumed their diabolical visitant.

"Leave my daughter's name out of this," cried Manthis, recoiling.

"Not at all. Her charm and ability have greatly impressed me—so impressed me that I have decided to make her my queen."

"You scum of the gutter. You filthy beast. I'd die before I'd be a party to such a thing!" The doctor was beside himself.

"I consider myself justified," replied the other, taking great delight in baiting his foe. "The world was never able to govern itself. We anarchists have bided our time, although overshadowed by communists, Fascists and such ridiculous experimenters. Now comes our turn. I shall be the viceroy of God. Under my rule and that of Queen June the world shall become a second heaven."

He rolled his eyes upward at those words. As he did so, Jack, who had been awaiting just such an opportunity, struck him on the jaw.

The blow would have felled an ox but Solinski merely staggered back a step and snarled. Before Baron could renew the attack he jerked an automatic from beneath his coat and leaped to the hall door.

"You I shall kill," he grinned evilly. "But not now. First you must taste the horror of sinking into the long sleep. You have no more drug, nor can you obtain any. Those pitiful storage batteries will be exhausted by the time you have aroused the child. So you must sleep unless you have the courage to kill yourself. Doctor, I deeply regret that this has occurred, but you see that I must let you and June sleep too. When I have need of you I will recall you. That is all. Farewell. May God pity you, Baron. I will not."

He sprang through the door and, the tails of his black coat flapping like the wings of a gigantic bat, vanished down the stairs.

Manthis slammed the door and locked it, then leaned weakly against the panels and wiped his round face. His hands shook pitifully.

"This then is the end," he whispered hoarsely.

"Is there none of the drug left?" Jack shook him out of his lethargy.

"Enough for a half portion for all of us," sighed the doctor. "But what use of that? Better we poisoned ourselves now and escaped that demon."

"Nonsense. A half portion means twelve hours of life. In that time I can rig up the big transmitter. Perhaps there is still time to revive New York. Solinski won't know we have a generator until we turn on the power. Quick. Poor June must be nearly frightened to death at our shouting."

But they found the girl sitting tense and jubilant at the controls.

"Father! Jack!" she cried as the door opened. "It's working. I saw her move. That means we may be able to revive the world!" Her face was streaked with tears.

"Her heart's beating," whispered the doctor, feeling the child's pulse.

"Slow but steady. She'll regain consciousness any moment now."

"No time to wait." Disregarding June's cry of protest Jack stripped off the electrodes. "We must get the big machine working."

"But the little thing will die again," cried June, throwing herself on her knees beside the tot. "I didn't think you could be so cruel."

"Solinski has cut off our drug supply," explained Manthis gently. "He's operating the other station. Don't blame Jack. We must work fast."

"You mean that Russian is responsible for all this?"

"Yes, child. But maybe we can defeat him yet. Don't lose courage. Now I must go and prepare what's left of the drug. We're overdue for it now."

Meanwhile Jack was busy running leads from the generator room, connecting banks of tubes, stringing an aerial on the terrace.

"Twelve hours! Twelve hours!" he muttered. "Just time to make it if the doctor's calculations are correct. June, hand me those pliers, but be careful of the wires. I haven't time to insulate them. When we start the dynamo they'll be carrying twelve thousand volts."

"But won't Solinski and his men come back and kill us?" For the first time the full weight of despair descended upon her brave spirit.

"Probably. Does your father have a revolver?"

"I—I think so."

"Find out." Jack connected a loading coil with deft fingers. "Then go down to a sporting goods store and get some ammunition. If there are any shotguns in the place bring two back with plenty of buckshot shells. I don't think we're being watched yet, but if you're attacked, run for it."

Noting she looked hurt at his abruptness, he kissed her quickly.

"Sorry, darling. Every second counts. Run along, like a good girl."

She smiled for the first time in a long while and patted his hand.

When she returned, two shotguns and several boxes of shells held like wood in her bent arms, the generator was sparkling merrily. The gasoline engine barked steadily and the vacuum tubes glowed green.

Manthis came in at that moment and injected all the remaining drug as Jack gave crisp orders. Automatically the engineer had taken command.

"I'll get things going and handle the dials until Solinski sends his rats down on us. June, you watch the street door. Run up at the first sign of an attack. After that you'll take my place and hold it, no matter what happens, until we succeed or are killed. The doctor and I will go downstairs when you come up, and hold them off or retreat slowly. Thank heaven we can command both the front and rear stairways from the halls. Now doctor, watch the circuit breaker. I'm going to throw on full power."

As he advanced the rheostat the tubes glowed brighter, bathing the room in unearthly light. Jack adjusted his headset, and smiled up at June. She kissed him bravely before hurrying to

her dangerous post.

Once more he sat listening to that whining, fluctuating wave. The engineer's thoughts wavered between speculations on the future, fond memories of June and impatience with the dragging hours. Would nothing ever happen? Through the earphones now came a jangling, agonized whine, as if the two antagonistic waves were endowed with life and actually struggling in the ether.

From time to time his glance wandered to the child, who, having obtained a head start through her preliminary treatment, now was stirring fretfully.

Slowly the time plodded by. Jack smoked cigarette after cigarette in an effort to fight off the drowsiness which loaded his eyelids with lead.

It must have been three o'clock when a whimper from the divan apprised them that the child at last had awakened.

"Where's mama?" She blinked into the glare. "I've lost my mama."

"There, there, honey," soothed the doctor, stopping his pacing up and down the room and picking her up. "Your mama had to go away for awhile. She'll be back any minute. Let's go find a drink of water. And I've something for you to play with too." Gently he carried her into June's bedroom.

Soon he reappeared and patted Jack on the shoulder.

"Our first victory," he said in a broken voice. "She's in perfect condition and sleeping naturally now. I gave her one of June's old dolls to play with." He sighed and collapsed into the nearest chair. "I'm almost dead with the strain of it. Do you think there's a chance?"

"Three more hours should turn the trick. I don't understand why Solinski—"

The crash of a shotgun, coming faint but clear from the street below, brought him up short. The shot was answered by a volley of rifle fire.

Jack almost lost the wave in his excitement, but regained it with a desperate twist of the wrist. No time for nerves now. He must be calm!

"Go down and hold them until June can get back to relieve me," he ordered. "Hurry. They may rush her any moment."

The doctor seemed ten years younger as he thrust a revolver into his pocket, snatched a shotgun from behind the door and ran out.

The commotion had awakened the child, who started whimpering, adding further to Jack's distractions. Yet he managed, in spite of ghastly mental pictures of June being torn to pieces by her attackers, to keep his hands steady.

A few minutes later she slipped into the room and laid her cold cheek against his before taking her place at the instruments.

"It's all right," she added. "I don't think they'll attack in the dark. There are five of them. I'm sure I wounded or killed one. They weren't expecting a guard. I left the gun with father. He's behind the cashier's desk." Then, all her courage evaporating, she turned an

appealing, little girl face toward her lover. "Don't let yourself be killed, Jack. I'd die too."

"June, you're wonderful," he whispered. "I didn't know there was a girl alive as brave as you. Good-by. No matter what happens, keep the wave in tune." He kissed her tenderly, trying not to think he had done so for the last time, and hurried out.

The stairs were black as the inside of a tomb. Once he stumbled over the body of a charwoman and came near falling headlong.

"Nothing's happened since that first volley," whispered Manthis when Jack slipped into the cage. "They're holding off for dawn. Look!" his voice wavered. "Was that a face at the window?" He fired wildly. Glass tinkled.

"Easy," warned Baron. "Don't waste ammunition. Besides, if you get this place full of smoke they'll jump us."

Dawn was painting the windows gray when the assault began. Their first warning came when a small object was tossed into the lobby. It exploded in a cloud of white vapor.

"Tear gas," yelled Jack. "Back to the stairs." They ran for cover, weeping and choking.

Then began a slow retreat up the stairways, Jack guarding the front and Manthis the back passages. At first it was a simple matter for their enemies to toss tear bombs through the fire doors, then, protected by respirators, capture another floor. But as the light increased this became more and more hazardous. Twice a spray of buckshot laid a Solinski man low.

"He hasn't many men available," called Jack as the attack slackened. "But watch out. His time's about up. Hey, look at that woman!" A white-uniformed maid, whom he remembered having seen lying in the same spot every time he climbed the stairs, had stirred weakly, as though about to wake.

It was their glance at the sleeping form which undid them. When they looked up both fire doors were open and helmeted figures were emerging from them.

The shotguns roared. Two of their attackers collapsed, but the others came on. Before there was time for another shot they were at close quarters. Standing back to back, Manthis and Jack clubbed their guns and held their ground.

The fact that Solinski and his men wore respirators handicapped them immensely, so that the two defenders kept a cleared circle about them.

One of the attackers, more daring than the rest, leaped forward to engage the engineer. He collapsed with a crushed skull.

Then, when victory seemed in their grasp, luck turned. At Jack's next blow the stock of his weapon parted from the barrel, leaving him almost defenseless. At the same time Manthis slipped and collapsed from a knife thrust.

Jack was left alone to face three enemies and would have been killed within the minute had not Solinski, recalling the little time he had left to stop the interfering wave, deserted his com-

rades and sprinted for the laboratory.

The seeming defection of their chief threw the other two attackers into momentary confusion. Before they could recover, Jack knocked one out with the gun barrel, then came a flying tackle at the other.

But he had caught a tartar. His remaining enemy was a gigantic Negro. Recovering from his surprise the latter lifted high a glittering knife to finish his disarmed foe. Jack snatched at the uplifted arm—missed!

A revolver cracked. The hooded Negro staggered, then crashed forward.

"Remembered my pistol just in time," gasped the doctor from the floor. "Don't bother about me. I'm all right. Stop Solinski, for God's sake."

Although his lungs seemed bursting Baron turned and flew up the stairs. Being familiar with every turn, he gained on the Russian and caught sight of the dreadful black coat-tails as his enemy burst through to the twentieth floor. The locked door of the apartment baffled him only a moment. Stepping back, Solinski hurled his giant frame against the panels. They splintered and crashed inward. But the delay allowed Jack to catch up.

He leaped on the Russian's back. Locked together they reeled into the living room. For a fleeting moment Jack saw June sitting rigidly at the instruments. Her eyes were starting from their sockets but her hands were steady.

"I warned you to kill yourself," Solinski's voice rose in a screaming whisper through the respirator. "Now I will do it." Displaying the strength of madness he hurled Jack from him. Losing all control of his limbs, the younger man flew across the room and demolished the divan in his fall. But the thought of what Solinski would do to June brought him back to the attack.

The fury of their struggle wrecked the living room. Both bled from numerous wounds. One of the Russian's bleak eyes closed under a well-directed blow, but otherwise he seemed unaffected. Jack grappled again and realized his mistake as he was caught in a bone-cracking grip and forced into the laboratory.

Baron felt a rib snap. A sweat of agony broke out over his body. Holding his enemy helpless the invader worked his way toward the work table. They bumped against it, making the equipment totter perilously. Solinski released his grip, snatched a bottle of distilled water and swung.

Jack felt his head explode. The room went dark. But in his semi-consciousness he remembered he must not let the Russian reach that switch. As he slid slowly to the floor, he grasped the other's legs.

The drug fiend tried to kick free, stumbled, struck the table with his hips. Throwing out his arms to regain his balance he plunged one hand among the naked cables which led from the generator to the transformers and tubes.

A blinding flash of light and the scream of a soul in torment followed. As a nauseating odor of burning flesh filled

the room, the Russian was hurled backward like a rubber ball. He struck the window which overlooked the park, crashed through the large panel and fell!

June sat as though hypnotised, forcing herself to manipulate those dials.

Jack crawled to the window and watched the black body swoop downward like a wounded bird, the coat flapping like crippled wings. After what seemed an eon it struck the edge of the subway kiosk, bounced like a rag doll and sprawled across the pavement.

Still Jack did not move. Through a haze of his own blood he stared, the fate of his enemy forgotten. All about the kiosk bodies which had laid so still for the past week were moving. The little figures, not much larger than ants from that height, yawned, sat up and stretched as though it was the commonest thing in the world to take a nap in the midst of Fifth Avenue. It was as if the last swoop of that batlike figure had returned them to consciousness.

"The world is alive! The world is alive!" Baron croaked wildly as he felt his senses slipping from him. "We have won, June! We have won!"

THE ETERNAL WALL

A scream of brakes, the splash into icy waters, a long descent into alkaline depths ... it was death. But Ned Vince lived again—a million years later!

"See you in half an hour, Betty," said Ned Vince over the party telephone. "We'll be out at the Silver Basket before ten-thirty...."

Ned Vince was eager for the company of the girl he loved. That was why he was in a hurry to get to the neighboring town of Hurley, where she lived. His old car rattled and roared as he swung it recklessly around Pit Bend.

There was where Death tapped him on the shoulder. Another car leaped suddenly into view, its lights glaring blindingly past a high, up-jutting mass of Jurassic rock at the turn of the road.

Dazzled, and befuddled by his own rash speed, Ned Vince had only swift young reflexes to rely on to avoid a fearful, telescoping collision. He flicked his wheel smoothly to the right; but the County Highway Commission hadn't yet tarred the traffic-loosened gravel at the Bend.

Ned could scarcely have chosen a worse place to start sliding and spinning. His car hit the white-painted wooden rail sideways, crashed through, tumbled down a steep slope, struck a huge boulder, bounced up a little, and arced outward, falling as gracefully as a swan-diver toward the inky waters of the Pit, fifty feet beneath....

Ned Vince was still dimly conscious when that black, quiet pool geysered around him in a mighty splash. He had only a dazing welt on his forehead, and a gag of terror in his throat.

Movement was slower now, as he began to sink, trapped inside his

wrecked car. Nothing that he could imagine could mean doom more certainly than this. The Pit was a tremendously deep pocket in the ground, spring-fed. The edges of that almost bottomless pool were caked with a rim of white—for the water, on which dead birds so often floated, was surcharged with alkali. As that heavy, natronous liquid rushed up through the openings and cracks beneath his feet, Ned Vince knew that his friends and his family would never see his body again, lost beyond recovery in this abyss.

The car was deeply submerged. The light had blinked out on the dash-panel, leaving Ned in absolute darkness. A flood rushed in at the shattered window. He clawed at the door, trying to open it, but it was jammed in the crash-bent frame, and he couldn't fight against the force of that incoming water. The welt, left by the blow he had received on his forehead, put a thickening mist over his brain, so that he could not think clearly. Presently, when he could no longer hold his breath, bitter liquid was sucked into his lungs.

His last thoughts were those of a drowning man. The machine-shop he and his dad had had in Harwich. Betty Moore, with the smiling Irish eyes—like in the song. Betty and he had planned to go to the State University this Fall. They'd planned to be married sometime.... Goodbye, Betty ...

The ripples that had ruffled the surface waters in the Pit, quieted again to glassy smoothness. The eternal stars shone calmly. The geologic Dakota hills, which might have seen the dinosaurs, still bulked along the highway. Time, the Brother of Death, and the Father of Change, seemed to wait....

"Kaalleee! Tik!... Tik, tik, tik!... Kaalleee!..."

The excited cry, which no human throat could quite have duplicated accurately, arose thinly from the depths of a powder-dry gulch, water-scarred from an inconceivable antiquity. The noon-day Sun was red and huge. The air was tenuous, dehydrated, chill.

"Kaalleee!... Tik, tik, tik!..."

At first there was only one voice uttering those weird, triumphant sounds. Then other vocal organs took up that trilling wail, and those short, sharp chuckles of eagerness. Other questioning, wondering notes mixed with the cadence. Lacking qualities identifiable as human, the disturbance was still like the babble of a group of workmen who have discovered something remarkable.

The desolate expanse around the gulch, was all but without motion. The icy breeze tore tiny puffs of dust from grotesque, angling drifts of soil, nearly waterless for eons. Patches of drab lichen grew here and there on the up-jutting rocks, but in the desert itself, no other life was visible. Even the hills had sagged away, flattened by incalculable ages of erosion.

At a mile distance, a crumbling heap of rubble arose. Once it had been a building. A gigantic, jagged mass of detritus slanted upward from its crest—red debris that had once been steel. A launching catapult for the last space

ships built by the gods in exodus, perhaps it was—half a million years ago. Man was gone from the Earth. Glacial ages, war, decadence, disease, and a final scattering of those ultimate superhumans to newer worlds in other solar systems, had done that.

"Kaalleee!... Tik, tik, tik!..." The sounds were not human. They were more like the chatter and wail of small desert animals.

But there was a seeming paradox here in the depths of that gulch, too. The glint of metal, sharp and burnished. The flat, streamlined bulk of a flying machine, shiny and new. The bell-like muzzle of a strange excavator-apparatus, which seemed to depend on a blast of atoms to clear away rock and soil. Thus the gulch had been cleared of the accumulated rubbish of antiquity. Man, it seemed, had a successor, as ruler of the Earth.

Loy Chuk had flown his geological expedition out from the far lowlands to the east, out from the city of Kar-Rah. And he was very happy now—flushed with a vast and unlooked-for success.

He crouched there on his haunches, at the dry bottom of the Pit. The breeze rumpled his long, brown fur. He wasn't very different in appearance from his ancestors. A foot tall, perhaps, as he squatted there in that antique stance of his kind. His tail was short and furred, his undersides creamy. White whiskers spread around his inquisitive, pink-tipped snout.

But his cranium bulged up and forward between shrewd, beady eyes, betraying the slow heritage of time, of survival of the fittest, of evolution. He could think and dream and invent, and the civilization of his kind was already far beyond that of the ancient Twentieth Century.

Loy Chuk and his fellow workers were gathered, tense and gleeful, around the things their digging had exposed to the daylight. There was a gob of junk—scarcely more than an irregular formation of flaky rust. But imbedded in it was a huddled form, brown and hard as old wood. The dry mud that had encased it like an airtight coffin, had by now been chipped away by the tiny investigators; but soiled clothing still clung to it, after perhaps a million years. Metal had gone into decay—yes. But not this body. The answer to this was simple—alkali. A mineral saturation that had held time and change in stasis. A perfect preservative for organic tissue, aided probably during most of those passing eras by desert dryness. The Dakotas had turned arid very swiftly. This body was not a mere fossil. It was a mummy.

"Kaalleee!" Man, that meant. Not the star-conquering demi-gods, but the ancestral stock that had built the first machines on Earth, and in the early Twenty-first Century, the first interplanetary rockets. No wonder Loy Chuk and his co-workers were happy in their paleontological enthusiasm! A strange accident, happening in a legendary antiquity, had aided them in their quest for knowledge.

At last Loy Chuk gave a soft, chirping signal. The chant of triumph ended,

while instruments flicked in his tiny hands. The final instrument he used to test the mummy, looked like a miniature stereoscope, with complicated details. He held it over his eyes. On the tiny screen within, through the agency of focused X-rays, he saw magnified images of the internal organs of this ancient human corpse.

What his probing gaze revealed to him, made his pleasure even greater than before. In twittering, chattering sounds, he communicated his further knowledge to his henchmen. Though devoid of moisture, the mummy was perfectly preserved, even to its brain cells! Medical and biological sciences were far advanced among Loy Chuk's kind. Perhaps, by the application of principles long known to them, this long-dead body could be made to live again! It might move, speak, remember its past! What a marvelous subject for study it would make, back there in the museums of Kar-Rah!

"Tik, tik, tik!..."

But Loy silenced this fresh, eager chattering with a command. Work was always more substantial than cheering.

With infinite care—small, sharp hand-tools were used, now—the mummy of Ned Vince was disengaged from the worthless rust of his primitive automobile. With infinite care it was crated in a metal case, and hauled into the flying machine.

Flashing flame, the latter arose, bearing the entire hundred members of the expedition. The craft shot eastward at bullet-like speed. The spreading continental plateau of North America seemed to crawl backward, beneath. A tremendous sand desert, marked with low, washed-down mountains, and the vague, angular, geometric mounds of human cities that were gone forever.

Beyond the eastern rim of the continent, the plain dipped downward steeply. The white of dried salt was on the hills, but there was a little green growth here, too. The dead sea-bottom of the vanished Atlantic was not as dead as the highlands.

Far out in a deep valley, Kar-Rah, the city of the rodents, came into view—a crystalline maze of low, bubble-like structures, glinting in the red sunshine. But this was only its surface aspect. Loy Chuk's people had built their homes mostly underground, since the beginning of their foggy evolution. Besides, in this latter day, the nights were very cold, the shelter of subterranean passages and rooms was welcome.

The mummy was taken to Loy Chuk's laboratory, a short distance below the surface. Here at once, the scientist began his work. The body of the ancient man was put in a large vat. Fluids submerged it, slowly soaking from that hardened flesh the alkali that had preserved it for so long. The fluid was changed often, until woody muscles and other tissues became pliable once more.

Then the more delicate processes began. Still submerged in liquid, the corpse was submitted to a flow of restorative energy, passing between complicated electrodes. The cells of antique

flesh and brain gradually took on a chemical composition nearer to that of the life that they had once known.

At last the final liquid was drained away, and the mummy lay there, a mummy no more, but a pale, silent figure in its tatters of clothing. Loy Chuk put an odd, metal-fabric helmet on its head, and a second, much smaller helmet on his own. Connected with this arrangement, was a black box of many uses. For hours he worked with his apparatus, studying, and guiding the recording instruments. The time passed swiftly.

At last, eager and ready for whatever might happen now, Loy Chuk pushed another switch. With a cold, rosy flare, energy blazed around that moveless form.

For Ned Vince, timeless eternity ended like a gradual fading mist. When he could see clearly again, he experienced that inevitable shock of vast change around him. Though it had been dehydrated, his brain had been kept perfectly intact through the ages, and now it was restored. So his memories were as vivid as yesterday.

Yet, through that crystalline vat in which he lay, he could see a broad, low room, in which he could barely have stood erect. He saw instruments and equipment whose weird shapes suggested alienness, and knowledge beyond the era he had known! The walls were lavender and phosphorescent. Fossil bone-fragments were mounted in shallow cases. Dinosaur bones, some of them seemed, from their size. But there was a complete skeleton of a dog, too, and the skeleton of a man, and a second man-skeleton that was not quite human. Its neck-vertebrae were very thick and solid, its shoulders were wide, and its skull was gigantic.

All this weirdness had a violent effect on Ned Vince—a sudden, nostalgic panic. Something was fearfully wrong!

The nervous terror of the unknown was on him. Feeble and dizzy after his weird resurrection, which he could not understand, remembering as he did that moment of sinking to certain death in the pool at Pit Bend, he caught the edge of the transparent vat, and pulled himself to a sitting posture. There was a muffled murmur around him, as of some vast, un-Earthly metropolis.

"Take it easy, Ned Vince...."

The words themselves, and the way they were assembled, were old, familiar friends. But the tone was wrong. It was high, shrill, parrot-like, and mechanical. Ned's gaze searched for the source of the voice—located the black box just outside of his crystal vat. From that box the voice seemed to have originated. Before it crouched a small, brownish animal with a bulging head. The animal's tiny-fingered paws—hands they were, really—were touching rows of keys.

To Ned Vince, it was all utterly insane and incomprehensible. A rodent, looking like a prairie dog, a little; but plainly possessing a high order of intelligence. And a voice whose soothingly familiar words were more repugnant somehow, simply because they could

never belong in a place as eerie as this.

Ned Vince did not know how Loy Chuk had probed his brain, with the aid of a pair of helmets, and the black box apparatus. He did not know that in the latter, his language, taken from his own revitalized mind, was recorded, and that Loy Chuk had only to press certain buttons to make the instrument express his thoughts in common, long-dead English. Loy, whose vocal organs were not human, would have had great difficulty speaking English words, anyway.

Ned's dark hair was wildly awry. His gaunt, young face held befuddled terror. He gasped in the thin atmosphere. "I've gone nuts," he pronounced with a curious calm. "Stark—starin'—nuts...."

Loy's box, with its recorded English words and its sonic detectors, could translate for its master, too. As the man spoke, Loy read the illuminated symbols in his own language, flashed on a frosted crystal plate before him. Thus he knew what Ned Vince was saying.

Loy Chuk pressed more keys, and the box reproduced his answer: "No, Ned, not nuts. Not a bit of it! There are just a lot of things that you've got to get used to, that's all. You drowned about a million years ago. I discovered your body. I brought you back to life. We have science that can do that. I'm Loy Chuk...."

It took only a moment for the box to tell the full story in clear, bold, friendly terms. Thus Loy sought, with calm, human logic, to make his charge feel at home. Probably, though, he was a fool, to suppose that he could succeed, thus.

Vince started to mutter, struggling desperately to reason it out. "A prairie dog," he said. "Speaking to me. One million years. Evolution. The scientists say that people grew up from fishes in the sea. Prairie dogs are smart. So maybe super-prairie-dogs could come from them. A lot easier than men from fish...."

It was all sound logic. Even Ned Vince knew that. Still, his mind, tuned to ordinary, simple things, couldn't quite realize all the vast things that had happened to himself, and to the world. The scope of it all was too staggeringly big. One million years. God!...

Ned Vince made a last effort to control himself. His knuckles tightened on the edge of the vat. "I don't know what you've been talking about," he grated wildly. "But I want to get out of here! I want to go back where I came from! Do you understand—whoever, or whatever you are?"

Loy Chuk pressed more keys. "But you can't go back to the Twentieth Century," said the box. "Nor is there any better place for you to be now, than Kar-Rah. You are the only man left on Earth. Those men that exist in other star systems are not really your kind anymore, though their forefathers originated on this planet. They have gone far beyond you in evolution. To them you would be only a senseless curiosity. You are much better off with my people—our minds are much more like yours. We will take care of you, and make you comfortable...."

But Ned Vince wasn't listening, now.

"You are the only man left on Earth." That had been enough for him to hear. He didn't more than half believe it. His mind was too confused for conviction about anything. Everything he saw and felt and heard might be some kind of nightmare. But then it might all be real instead, and that was abysmal horror. Ned was no coward—death and danger of any ordinary Earthly kind, he could have faced bravely. But the loneliness here, and the utter strangeness, were hideous like being stranded alone on another world!

His heart was pounding heavily, and his eyes were wide. He looked across this eerie room. There was a ramp there at the other side, leading upward instead of a stairway. Fierce impulse to escape this nameless lair, to try to learn the facts for himself, possessed him. He bounded out of the vat, and with head down, dashed for the ramp.

He had to go most of the way on his hands and knees, for the up-slanting passage was low. Excited animal chucklings around him, and the occasional touch of a furry body, hurried his feverish scrambling. But he emerged at last at the surface.

He stood there panting in that frigid, rarefied air. It was night. The Moon was a gigantic, pock-marked bulk. The constellations were unrecognizable. The rodent city was a glowing expanse of shallow, crystalline domes, set among odd, scrub trees and bushes. The crags loomed on all sides, all their jaggedness lost after a million years of erosion under an ocean that was gone. In that ghastly moonlight, the ground glistened with dry salt.

"Well, I guess it's all true, huh?" Ned Vince muttered in a flat tone.

Behind him he heard an excited, squeaky chattering. Rodents in pursuit. Looking back, he saw the pinpoint gleams of countless little eyes. Yes, he might as well be an exile on another planet—so changed had the Earth become.

A wave of intolerable homesickness came over him as he sensed the distances of time that had passed—those inconceivable eons, separating himself from his friends, from Betty, from almost everything that was familiar. He started to run, away from those glittering rodent eyes. He sensed death in that cold sea-bottom, but what of it? What reason did he have left to live? He'd be only a museum piece here, a thing to be caged and studied....

Prison or a madhouse would be far better. He tried to get hold of his courage. But what was there to inspire it? Nothing! He laughed harshly as he ran, welcoming that bitter, killing cold. Nostalgia had him in its clutch, and there was no answer in his hell-world, lost beyond the barrier of the years....

Loy Chuk and his followers presently came upon Ned Vince's unconscious form, a mile from the city of Kar-Rah. In a flying machine they took him back, and applied stimulants. He came to, in the same laboratory room as before. But he was firmly strapped to a low platform this time, so that he could not escape again. There he lay, helpless, until presently an idea occurred to him.

It gave him a few crumbs of hope.

"Hey, somebody!" he called.

"You'd better get some rest, Ned Vince," came the answer from the black box. It was Loy Chuk speaking again.

"But listen!" Ned protested. "You know a lot more than we did in the Twentieth Century. And—well—there's that thing called time-travel, that I used to read about. Maybe you know how to make it work! Maybe you could send me back to my own time after all!"

Little Loy Chuk was in a black, discouraged mood, himself. He could understand the utter, sick dejection of this giant from the past, lost from his own kind. Probably insanity looming. In far less extreme circumstances than this, death from homesickness had come.

Loy Chuk was a scientist. In common with all real scientists, regardless of the species from which they spring, he loved the subjects of his researches. He wanted this ancient man to live and to be happy. Or this creature would be of scant value for study.

So Loy considered carefully what Ned Vince had suggested. Time-travel. Almost a legend. An assault upon an intangible wall that had baffled far keener wits than Loy's. But he was bent, now, on the well-being of this anachronism he had so miraculously resurrected—this human, this Kaalleee....

Loy jabbed buttons on the black box. "Yes, Ned Vince," said the sonic apparatus. "Time-travel. Perhaps that is the only thing to do—to send you back to your own period of history. For I see that you will never be yourself, here. It will be hard to accomplish, but we'll try. Now I shall put you under an anesthetic...."

Ned felt better immediately, for there was real hope now, where there had been none before. Maybe he'd be back in his home-town of Harwich again. Maybe he'd see the old machine-shop, there. And the trees greening out in Spring. Maybe he'd be seeing Betty Moore in Hurley, soon.... Ned relaxed, as a tiny hypo-needle bit into his arm....

As soon as Ned Vince passed into unconsciousness, Loy Chuk went to work once more, using that pair of brain-helmets again, exploring carefully the man's mind. After hours of research, he proceeded to prepare his plans. The government of Kar-Rah was a scientific oligarchy, of which Loy was a prime member. It would be easy to get the help he needed.

A horde of small, grey-furred beings and their machines, toiled for many days.

Ned Vince's mind swam gradually out of the blur that had enveloped it. He was wandering aimlessly about in a familiar room. The girders of the roof above were of red-painted steel. His tool-benches were there, greasy and littered with metal filings, just as they had always been. He had a tractor to repair, and a seed-drill. Outside of the machine-shop, the old, familiar yellow sun was shining. Across the street was the small brown house, where he lived.

With a sudden startlement, he saw Betty Moore in the doorway. She wore a blue dress, and a mischievous smile

curved her lips. As though she had succeeded in creeping up on him, for a surprise.

"Why, Ned," she chuckled. "You look as though you've been dreaming, and just woke up!"

He grimaced ruefully as she approached. With a kind of fierce gratitude, he took her in his arms. Yes, she was just like always.

"I guess I was dreaming, Betty," he whispered, feeling that mighty sense of relief. "I must have fallen asleep at the bench, here, and had a nightmare. I thought I had an accident at Pit Bend—and that a lot of worse things happened.... But it wasn't true ..."

Ned Vince's mind, over which there was still an elusive fog that he did not try to shake off, accepted apparent facts simply.

He did not know anything about the invisible radiations beating down upon him, soothing and dimming his brain, so that it would never question or doubt, or observe too closely the incongruous circumstances that must often appear. The lack of traffic in the street without, for instance—and the lack of people besides himself and Betty.

He didn't know that this machine-shop was built from his own memories of the original. He didn't know that this Betty was of the same origin—a miraculous fabrication of metal and energy-units and soft plastic. The trees outside were only lantern-slide illusions.

It was all built inside a great, opaque dome. But there were hidden television systems, too. Thus Loy Chuk's kind could study this ancient man—this Kaalleee. Thus, their motives were mostly selfish.

Loy, though, was not observing, now. He had wandered far out into cold, sad sea-bottom, to ponder. He squeaked and chatted to himself, contemplating the magnificent, inexorable march of the ages. He remembered the ancient ruins, left by the final supermen.

"The Kaalleee believes himself home," Loy was thinking. "He will survive and be happy. But there was no other way. Time is an Eternal Wall. Our archeological researches among the cities of the supermen show the truth. Even they, who once ruled Earth, never escaped from the present by so much as an instant...."

THE ETHICAL WAY

There is a way around every tabu, knock on wood—but just watch out that the wood doesn't knock back!

"Is it time?" Jarth Rolan asked anxiously. Pilot Lan Barda pushed him gently back into a seat. "No, but very soon. And be calm—you're jumpier than a human."

"But we've waited so long—yes, a long time. And I *am* anxious to get home."

Lan peered calmly out of his vehicle. They were hovering in Earth's upper at-

mosphere, at the permitted limit.

"Be patient. These people have almost reached the critical point. We'll get the signal before long."

Jarth Rolan popped out of his chair and danced about in nervous excitement.

"Won't it be dangerous? For us, I mean. Going down into that radioactive atmosphere. And how about them—will any of them live? Suppose we wait too long?"

Lan Barda laughed. He was a husky humanoid, pinkish of skin and completely hairless, like all galactics. He slapped Jarth Rolan's back.

"We have experts watching. These humans have used four cobalt bombs, and plenty of smaller stuff. The fallout is close to the danger point. Our observers will know just when we can move in because—" he winked and his voice dropped to a conspiratorial whisper—"they're using automatically controlled instruments."

"Oh, my!" Jarth Rolan clapped his hands to his cheeks. "But those are robots—and the use of robots is against religion."

"I know, Jarth. But we won't be using them much longer, will we?" He poked a playful finger into Jarth's ribs. "We'll have slaves—and it'll be completely ethical."

Jarth Rolan winced. "Must you use that word 'slaves,' Lan? It sounds so—" He waved his hands.

Lan laughed again. "Be honest with yourself, Jarth. You're out to make a few *dopolins* for yourself as a slave raider."

"An entrepreneur," said Jarth. "In personal services."

Lan Barda became serious. "There's the signal—it's time to go down. Let's go, Jarth, before somebody else gets them all."

An hour later, it was Lan Barda's turn to be nervous. He watched a needle creep into the red zone.

"Hurry, Jarth. We've been on this planet long enough. That fifth cobalt bomb is sending the index up fast. Can't you skip these last few?"

"Oh, no. Very unethical to leave these three here to die. Must take a small chance, you know. Besides, see the sign on that taxi—just married. A fine young couple. And a fine young taxi driver. Couldn't sleep if I didn't help these three."

"Couldn't sleep thinking of the profit you'd passed up. Here, let me take that one. We have to get out of here fast."

Jarth Rolan fluttered anxiously about the pilot until they were safely above the poisoned atmosphere.

"How many?" he asked. "Did we fill the ship?"

Lan Barda checked off items on his clipboard. "A thousand and three, with these last ones. You'll make a good profit."

"Not so much the profit. Oh, no. More than that involved. Ethics and religion, Lan. Yes. With all these sla—servants, our people will never have to use robots. They'll be relieved of routine labor and can devote their lives to art and science. And it's all ethical—oh, yes, for these people were doomed."

"Want to know something, Jarth?" Lan Barda bent closer and whispered wickedly. "This ship has automatic controls. Has to. No living being has fast enough reactions to handle an interstellar ship. All robot driven, at least in part."

"Robots! May we be forgiven!" Jarth stared suspiciously at Lan Barda. "Sometimes, Lan, I think you are an agnostic."

The pilot became more serious. "Maybe, Jarth. In our work, we must use robots. We joke about it, but it goes against all galactic belief to let a machine think for us. Maybe that's why we pilots are so cynical."

"A galactic is always ethical," said Jarth Rolan solemnly. "This affair, for example. We let these poor creatures of Earth handle their own affairs with no interference until they doomed themselves. It was unethical to intervene a minute sooner. Yes—the ethical way and I feel better for it and proud to be a galactic."

"That's true," said Lan Barda. "A galactic wouldn't feel right, being a member of the dominant race of the Galaxy, if he didn't help the less fortunate."

Jarth Rolan had prepared a center on his estate for the slaves. The demand was greater than the supply. He chatted happily with his wife.

"An excellent investment, Shalla—yes. And the highest group council wants us to lease them out by the day for the present instead of selling outright."

She nodded. "That's the fair way. Everybody can have a turn having a slave."

"And," said Jarth, rubbing his pink hands, "we'll collect every day and still hold title."

"Will they multiply fast," asked Shalla, "so there will be enough for all?"

"They always did on Earth. Yes. By the time we pass our estate on to our son, this investment will have multiplied in value."

At the center, the slaves clustered about the bulletin boards to read the slave code. The three who had been brought aboard last stood together. Laurent Crotier and his wife Jean were still in their wedding clothes, and Sam the taxi driver was in uniform. They read the seven articles of the slave code.

"We have to work twelve hours a day," Laurent observed. "And have off every seventh day. This could be worse."

"We'll keep our eyes open and wait for our chance," Sam piped up. "Some day we'll make a break out of here."

"Yeah," said Jean. "And remember, Frenchy, no kids."

Nine months later, Laurent, Jr., was born. Before the blessed event, Laurent went to Jarth Rolan with a complaint.

"She can't do it, work twelve hours a day now. You have to change the rules. By gar, if my wife die 'count of this, I goin' kill you, Jarth Rolan."

Jarth Rolan waltzed about nervously, biting his fingernails.

"No, we do not want her to have trouble. No. She will need proper rest. There is a meeting of the highest group

council right now, concerning this. Others have the same problem. But yes, I will relieve her of work without waiting for the council's decision. Tell your wife to stay home, Laurent, until the baby is born."

Laurent pushed his luck. "And after that, too. A kid got to have a mother. I do the work for three, you let my wife take care of the family."

"Oh, this *is* a problem!" Jarth Rolan rubbed his fingers unhappily over his bald scalp. "Some of the other females are in the same condition. But it is like planting a crop—one labors hard at the beginning to reap a great harvest later. We will work this out."

The next day, fifteen articles amending the code arrived and were posted. Laurent read happily.

"Now," he said to Jean, "it is the law. You will stay home and have the baby."

"'And for such further period'," she read, "'as is considered necessary.' You sure told him off, Frenchy."

She squeezed his arm affectionately and his chest went out a little.

"And remember," she said, "this is the last one."

"Look at this rule," said Sam. "All kids must be educated. I'm only—" he winked at them—"thirteen. It's off the job and back to school for me."

Laurent blinked. "By gar, Sam, I think you been shaving pretty near as long as I am. But if Jarth Rolan ask me, I say I know Sam is thirteen."

Jarth Rolan came along to explain the amendments.

"We don't want the slaves to be ignorant. Oh, no. It will be worth extra effort and expense to reap the harvest. The slaves will work at many specialized tasks. Even personal servants will read and write letters and help at business and keep accounts—yes, indeed. We must assign some slaves to teaching."

About the time Laurent, Jr., started school, Laurent led a delegation to Jarth Rolan.

"We got some complaint to make. These food servings pretty small lately. We work hard, we have to eat more."

Jarth Rolan's facial skin had developed wrinkles, though the galactics' life span was comparable to a human's and he was only about forty. He fidgeted.

"I am sorry—oh, yes. Sorry. There have been delays in food shipments—the same trouble all over. Too many excused from the work force, you know. Most of the women are pregnant or have children, and teachers and special assignments—but things will improve, believe me. Yes. You will soon find an improvement. Yes—very soon."

The delegation talked it over outside Jarth Rolan's house.

"He's been letting himself go," said a woman. "Did you notice how thin he's become? And the same with his family."

Laurent reflected. "To raise a lot of kids is hard. My father, he work like hell all the time. Raise his own food, don't depend on nobody. I think that land back of the center, we should plough it up and put in some potatoes."

"On our own time?" Sam exclaimed.

Laurent chuckled. "Well, Sam, you got no kids—you just a young boy eigh-

teen years old. By gar, I think you have gray hair when you twenty-one."

The others joined the laughter. Sam's lie about his age had boomeranged—he had been kept in school and denied permission to marry until he was officially eighteen, a few months ago.

Laurent fingered his chin thoughtfully. "I think we look over that land. Maybe we get some time out from our regular work, we do some farming."

Before the blowup on Earth, the galactics had made occasional landings to gather animals and seeds of food plants. Certain centers were put under government control to grow food for the slaves. The people at Jarth Rolan's center saw that this arrangement was breaking down because of the increasing slave population and the diversion of labor to child raising. They looked over the piece of land and Laurent okayed it. They went back to Jarth Rolan. He approved at once.

"Oh, indeed. I can obtain all the equipment you'll need. Get started right away. We can grow a good part of our own food. Yes. I am sure it will work out."

"We goin' need some time for work the farm," Laurent pointed out.

"Oh? I thought maybe in your spare time—"

"You want to kill us?" Sam demanded. "Put us on an extra job after working us hard twelve hours a day?"

"But—there's so little coming in. Still, maybe you're right. Worth the extra trouble and expense now. Building for the future—that's the idea."

Jarth Rolan notified his group leader of the arrangement and it percolated swiftly up through the hierarchy to the council of the highest group heads, who directed policy for the entire Galaxy. There were nine of them and they talked over this development.

"I approve. We should have done it this way from the beginning."

"Of course. But certain advocates of government control insisted on public ownership of the food farms—"

"What do you mean, certain advocates? If you mean me, be galactic enough to say so."

"I intend no personal offense to anybody. But there is bound to be inefficiency in any government project—"

The chairman pounded the table. "Stay with the subject. It has been suggested that each center grow part of its food. I am in favor."

"But it cuts down the available labor force. We're having complaints now about the shortage of slaves—"

"Think of the future. I admit the present situation is difficult. It's like raising a herd of prize cattle—all expense and no profit at first. Then the herd is built up and suddenly you're rich."

"But we're putting so much into it..."

"The more we put in, the more we take out. And they're multiplying rapidly. Remember our new goal of two slaves for each galactic—one for the day shift and one for the night. It's the only way our people can live a decent life, freed from routine labor, devoting themselves to art and science."

"That's right. We work so our children can lead the better life. It's worth

some sacrifice."

The chairman stood up. "Most of us seem willing to endure a little hardship now for the benefit of our children. I suggest we endorse this new procedure."

Laurent, Jr., married the girl next door. Laurent celebrated the wedding with a barrel of beer he had brewed on the farm. Sam became glassy-eyed and lectured the young couple.

"Just wait for the right time. Rise up and capture their spaceships. That's what we'll do. We'll go back to Earth and then let them try to get us off it again."

"But Earth is dead," Laurent, Jr., objected. "We can't live there. Poisonous radiation."

"By gar!" Laurent drained another brew. "You believe everything they tell you, hah? We goin' show them sometime. Like Sam says, not now, but sometime. Maybe me and Sam don't do it, but don't you kids forget—you not goin' be slaves always. You watch for the right time, like Sam says."

His son looked dubious. "But what you told me about Earth doesn't sound so good. Like the way you were so cold and hungry in that shack in Canada. And Mama walking up five flights in New York after working all day in the garment factory. And all those wars! Why did you people spend half your time shooting each other, Dad?"

Laurent belched indignantly. "By gar, boy! We was free! We don't have no galactic stand over us, do this, do that. We was free!"

"We don't work so hard," said his son. "And look at old Jarth Rolan and the others out there—they've given us the day off, but the galactics are all busy in the fields. Everybody has to work, Dad."

Laurent looked through a slight haze at the masters laboring in the potato fields. Farm work and teaching and other special assignments had created a shortage of personal slaves. Jarth Rolan gave preference in leasing slaves to those who came and helped him at the center.

Since having a personal slave was a mark of prestige among the galactics, many of those laboring on the farm were from the highest levels of society.

"They don't know nothing about raise potatoes," Laurent grumbled. "We put in complaint, by damn. We want each one have his own land. I work like jackass, I want to get paid for it."

The highest group council was in session. One member was explaining: "It's the custom of tipping slaves. At first, those who could get a slave were so happy that they often gave him a few coins. Now the custom is firmly established—anybody who doesn't tip a slave is considered cheap. I do it and so do you."

"Of course. What's wrong with giving them a few *polins* now and then? Or a *dopolin* or two when they have a baby or a wedding?"

"Nothing wrong with it, in itself. But they don't spend anything. We supply their food and clothing; nothing else we have seems to appeal to them. The money goes out of circulation. It's estimated that half the money in the Galaxy is being hoarded by slaves."

"What? That's impossible. Just from those small tips?"

"Small tips, but day after day; year after year. Add up some time what you've given and multiply by the number who've been doing it."

"Then that's behind our economic troubles. A currency shortage. Can we take it away from them?"

"Of course not. Besides being unethical, it would turn them against us. They wouldn't understand."

"Then we'll abolish tipping."

"Too late. What we need is an ethical way of getting back that currency."

A new member spoke: "I understand that on Earth these slaves were often addicted to alcohol, gambling and various alkaloids. Perhaps we could introduce these items, under government control, of course—"

He stopped. Eight pair of eyes were blazing at him.

"You're new here," the chairman said. "If you ever make another suggestion like that—"

They pondered. The chairman fingered some papers.

"Here's a suggestion. The slaves have been petitioning for the right to own land. It seems to be the only thing they'll spend their money for."

"Impossible!"

"But maybe—"

"We could limit the holdings."

"And have the land subject to condemnation by the government at a fair price."

The chairman called for order. "Let's argue this out. Remember the slaves will need time to work their land. Since their work day is down to nine hours, we'll have to arrange something."

Jean had been complaining about the lumps in the mattress. When Laurent took them out, there was enough in galactic currency to buy a piece of land in his name and hers, plus a plot for each of the children, and a new mattress as well. Sam was suspicious.

"They're out to get what little we've been able to save, Laurent. They can take the land anytime—for what they call a fair price. Fair! Fine chance they'll be fair about it."

But Laurent kept the land and was even able to buy a piece for each grandchild, although they arrived faster and faster as his own large family grew up and married. One day Jean called him to a new house at the edge of the widely expanded center to see the latest arrival.

Laurent poked a finger at the squalling creature. "So I'm another grandpa. Which one this?"

"This time you're a great-grandpa, Frenchy. This is Laurent 4th."

"You mean we gettin' that old? By damn! Well, I'm buy him a piece of land, too. So much new building, this land be worth plenty when he grows up."

The 512th amendment permitted slaves to retire at 65. Laurent was a leading real estate dealer by that time. He had twenty-three children and more grandchildren than he could count. The center was grown to a city, its main

street running through what had been his first farm. Sometimes Laurent relaxed in his rocking chair and needled Sam.

"By gar, Sam, if you not the oldest-looking man of fifty-five I ever see. I think you a hundred years old when you retire. When you havin' that revolution?"

"The day will come if we keep after the young ones. But damn it, Laurent, it's hard to talk any sense into them. Some of them can't even understand me."

"Well, they all talk galactic, Sam. My grandson, he call himself Loran Kotay. But these young people, they have to live their own lives. Hey, look at old Jarth Rolan up there, washing his windows. Old guy should retire, Sam. I'm goin' see a couple of my boys give him a hand."

But Jarth Rolan died before he could afford to retire and was replaced by his only grandson, Jarro Kogar. Laurent and Jean passed on shortly after, leaving nearly four hundred descendants.

Jarro Kogar was a newly married galactic in his early thirties. He moved into the mansion and talked things over with his wife.

"Don't see how we can afford a child right now. Wouldn't be fair to the child. Things will improve in a few years."

"Of course," she said. "We're young—we'll have time to start our family. If we wait, we'll be able to give them more."

They held similar conversations later and one day realized it was too late. Jarro Kogar died in his sixties. His widow directed the center for several more years. The slaves liked her and took good care of her. She left them the estate when she died.

Loran Krotalu protested to the authorities that the slaves didn't want the estate. But the group heads ruled it legal under amendment 1,486, especially since no relatives could be located.

Loran left the center and moved to another city where he found a galactic couple who wanted a slave. He and his family served the galactic couple for many years. This couple, like Jarro Kogar and his wife, were childless and when they both died, Loran and his wife were very grieved.

After the funeral, Loran went into the city. He returned hours later, tired and depressed.

"It's no use," he told his wife. "There's not an unattached galactic in the area. We might get a few hours work a week with one, but we can't have one to ourselves."

"But, Loran, *everybody* in our set works for a galactic!"

"I know," he said miserably. "But it's no use. There must be fifty slaves for every galactic. I've taken a job at the spaceship factory. It's the best I can do."

Membership on the highest group council had become a killing job. Chief problem was the revision of the slave code, which had 3,697 articles. After trying for years to simplify the code, the council members called in Loran Krovalo to fill a vacancy and take over the job.

Loran was known and liked by galactic and slave alike for his brilliant es-

says on the master-slave relationship. While he was on the council, the Cerberan affair broke out. The Cerberans, an intelligent saurian race from a globular cluster, exploded into the Galaxy in vast numbers. Military action became necessary.

"We can handle them," Loran told the council. "Our factories are mobilized and we have any number of spacemen. We have robot instruments for fighting that are better than anything they have. We can carry the war to their home planets."

Some of the galactics objected.

"But the use of robots is forbidden. We can't fight the Cerberans with robot-controlled weapons."

"Don't worry, sir," Loran said kindly. "We slaves will take care of it. Our form of religion doesn't prohibit robots unless they are in the shape of a man. We think of real robots as being human in shape."

One of the galactics rose.

"I know you're right, but my conscience won't let me vote for robots in any form. Therefore I am resigning from the council."

A second rose, then a third and fourth. They looked at each other, and one spoke for the group.

"We are also resigning. I suggest that four slaves be appointed in our places for the duration of the war. Then they will have a majority and no galactic need violate his conscience by voting for the use of robots."

The Cerberans were crushed, but the infested area was huge and the invasion of the globular cluster took time. The war emergency lasted fifty years. When it was over, the slaves called on the galactics to take back control of the government.

But the widespread use of robot mechanisms in the war had caused a reaction among the galactics. Their consciences simmered and a wave of orthodoxy swept over their race. There was difficulty in persuading galactics to leave their home planets to sit on the council, because faster-than-light ships used robot controls.

The slaves scoured the planet that housed the council and kept two or three seats filled with galactics for a while. But they were generally old, and they died, and most of them were unmarried or childless.

Loran Crotay, twelfth-generation slave, sat in his home chatting with a friend from far-off Pornalu VI. Being in the space-shipping business, he had many friends throughout the Galaxy.

His wife answered the door and a pink humanoid shuffled in, mumbling greetings, and went into the other room. He was middle-aged, studious and bespectacled, and he wore a wig. Loran's friend watched him curiously.

"Haven't seen one of them in years, Loran. We have a reservation for the poor devils on my planet. Don't reproduce very fast, you know, and they may become extinct. Too bad—they're so likable. Always so ethical and conscientious."

"I know." Loran nodded. "We let poor Vendro make a few *dopolins* tutor-

ing our son. He's very intelligent and a good teacher. I like to help them all I can—the only ethical thing to do. I wouldn't feel like a slave if I didn't give poor Vendro a break."

"That's true," said his friend. "A slave wouldn't feel right, being a member of the dominant race of the Galaxy, if he didn't help the less fortunate."

THE EYES HAVE IT

A little whimsy, now and then, makes for good balance. Theoretically, you could find this type of humor anywhere. But only a topflight science-fictionist, we thought, could have written this story, in just this way....

It was quite by accident I discovered this incredible invasion of Earth by lifeforms from another planet. As yet, I haven't done anything about it; I can't think of anything to do. I wrote to the Government, and they sent back a pamphlet on the repair and maintenance of frame houses. Anyhow, the whole thing is known; I'm not the first to discover it. Maybe it's even under control.

I was sitting in my easy-chair, idly turning the pages of a paperbacked book someone had left on the bus, when I came across the reference that first put me on the trail. For a moment I didn't respond. It took some time for the full import to sink in. After I'd comprehended, it seemed odd I hadn't noticed it right away.

The reference was clearly to a non-human species of incredible properties, not indigenous to Earth. A species, I hasten to point out, customarily masquerading as ordinary human beings. Their disguise, however, became transparent in the face of the following observations by the author. It was at once obvious the author knew everything. Knew everything—and was taking it in his stride. The line (and I tremble remembering it even now) read:

... his eyes slowly roved about the room.

Vague chills assailed me. I tried to picture the eyes. Did they roll like dimes? The passage indicated not; they seemed to move through the air, not over the surface. Rather rapidly, apparently. No one in the story was surprised. That's what tipped me off. No sign of amazement at such an outrageous thing. Later the matter was amplified.

... his eyes moved from person to person.

There it was in a nutshell. The eyes had clearly come apart from the rest of him and were on their own. My heart pounded and my breath choked in my windpipe. I had stumbled on an accidental mention of a totally unfamiliar race. Obviously non-Terrestrial. Yet, to the characters in the book, it was perfectly natural—which suggested they belonged to the same species.

And the author? A slow suspicion burned in my mind. The author was taking it rather too easily in his stride. Evidently, he felt this was quite a usual

thing. He made absolutely no attempt to conceal this knowledge. The story continued:

... presently his eyes fastened on Julia.

Julia, being a lady, had at least the breeding to feel indignant. She is described as blushing and knitting her brows angrily. At this, I sighed with relief. They weren't all non-Terrestrials. The narrative continues:

... slowly, calmly, his eyes examined every inch of her.

Great Scott! But here the girl turned and stomped off and the matter ended. I lay back in my chair gasping with horror. My wife and family regarded me in wonder.

"What's wrong, dear?" my wife asked.

I couldn't tell her. Knowledge like this was too much for the ordinary run-of-the-mill person. I had to keep it to myself. "Nothing," I gasped. I leaped up, snatched the book, and hurried out of the room.

In the garage, I continued reading. There was more. Trembling, I read the next revealing passage:

... he put his arm around Julia. Presently she asked him if he would remove his arm. He immediately did so, with a smile.

It's not said what was done with the arm after the fellow had removed it. Maybe it was left standing upright in the corner. Maybe it was thrown away. I don't care. In any case, the full meaning was there, staring me right in the face.

Here was a race of creatures capable of removing portions of their anatomy at will. Eyes, arms—and maybe more. Without batting an eyelash. My knowledge of biology came in handy, at this point. Obviously they were simple beings, uni-cellular, some sort of primitive single-celled things. Beings no more developed than starfish. Starfish can do the same thing, you know.

I read on. And came to this incredible revelation, tossed off coolly by the author without the faintest tremor:

... outside the movie theater we split up. Part of us went inside, part over to the cafe for dinner.

Binary fission, obviously. Splitting in half and forming two entities. Probably each lower half went to the cafe, it being farther, and the upper halves to the movies. I read on, hands shaking. I had really stumbled onto something here. My mind reeled as I made out this passage:

... I'm afraid there's no doubt about it. Poor Bibney has lost his head again.

Which was followed by:

... and Bob says he has utterly no guts.

Yet Bibney got around as well as the next person. The next person, however, was just as strange. He was soon described as:

... totally lacking in brains.

There was no doubt of the thing in the next passage. Julia, whom I had thought to be the one normal person, reveals herself as also being an alien life form, similar to the rest:

... quite deliberately, Julia had given her heart to the young man.

It didn't relate what the final disposition of the organ was, but I didn't really care. It was evident Julia had gone right on living in her usual manner, like all the others in the book. Without heart, arms, eyes, brains, viscera, dividing up in two when the occasion demanded. Without a qualm.

... thereupon she gave him her hand.

I sickened. The rascal now had her hand, as well as her heart. I shudder to think what he's done with them, by this time.

... he took her arm.

Not content to wait, he had to start dismantling her on his own. Flushing crimson, I slammed the book shut and leaped to my feet. But not in time to escape one last reference to those carefree bits of anatomy whose travels had originally thrown me on the track:

... her eyes followed him all the way down the road and across the meadow.

I rushed from the garage and back inside the warm house, as if the accursed things were following me. My wife and children were playing Monopoly in the kitchen. I joined them and played with frantic fervor, brow feverish, teeth chattering.

I had had enough of the thing. I want to hear no more about it. Let them come on. Let them invade Earth. I don't want to get mixed up in it.

I have absolutely no stomach for it.

The Gifts of Asti

She was the guardian of the worlds, but HER world was dead.

Even here, on the black terrace before the forgotten mountain retreat of Asti, it was possible to smell the dank stench of burning Memphir, to imagine that the dawn wind bore upward from the pillaged city the faint tortured cries of those whom the barbarians of Klem hunted to their prolonged death. Indeed it was time to leave—

Varta, last of the virgin Maidens of Asti, shivered. The scaled and wattled creature who crouched beside her thigh turned his reptilian head so that golden eyes met the aquamarine ones set slantingly at a faintly provocative angle in her smooth ivory face.

"We go—?"

She nodded in answer to that unvoiced question Lur had sent into her brain, and turned toward the dark cavern which was the mouth of Asti's last dwelling place. Once, more than a thousand years before when the walls of Memphir were young, Asti had lived among men below. But in the richness and softness which was trading Memphir, empire of empires, Asti found no place. So He and those who served Him had withdrawn to this mountain outcrop. And she, Varta, was the last, the very last to bow knee at Asti's shrine and

raise her voice in the dawn hymn—for Lur, as were all his race, was mute.

Even the loot of Memphir would not sate the shaggy headed warriors who had stormed her gates this day. The stairway to Asti's Temple was plain enough to see and there would be those to essay the steep climb hoping to find a treasure which did not exist. For Asti was an austere God, delighting in plain walls and bare altars. His last priest had lain in the grave niches these three years, there would be none to hold that gate against intruders.

Varta passed between tall, uncarved pillars, Lur padding beside her, his spine mane erect, the talons on his forefeet clicking on the stone in steady rhythm. So they came into the innermost shrine of Asti and there Varta made graceful obeisance to the great cowled and robed figure which sat enthroned, its hidden eyes focused upon its own outstretched hand.

And above the flattened palm of that wide hand hung suspended in space the round orange-red sun ball which was twin to the sun that lighted Erb. Around the miniature sun swung in their orbits the four worlds of the system, each obeying the laws of space, even as did the planets they represented.

"Memphir has fallen," Varta's voice sounded rusty in her own ears. She had spoken so seldom during the last lonely months. "Evil has risen to overwhelm our world, even as it was prophesied in Your Revelations, O, Ruler of Worlds and Maker of Destiny. Therefore, obeying the order given of old, I would depart from this, Thy house. Suffer me now to fulfill the Law—"

Three times she prostrated her slim body on the stones at the foot of Asti's judgment chair. Then she arose and, with the confidence of a child in its father, she laid her hand palm upward upon the outstretched hand of Asti. Beneath her flesh the stone was not cold and hard, but seemed to have an inner heat, even as might a human hand. For a long moment she stood so and then she raised her hand slowly, carefully, as if within its slight hollow she cupped something precious.

And, as she drew her hand away from the grasp of Asti, the tiny sun and its planets followed, spinning now above her palm as they had above the statue's. But out of the cowled figure some virtue had departed with the going of the miniature solar system; it was now but a carving of stone. And Varta did not look at it again as she passed behind its bulk to seek a certain place in the temple wall, known to her from much reading of the old records.

Having found the stone she sought, she moved her hand in a certain pattern before it so that the faint radiance streaming from the tiny sun, gleamed on the grayness of the wall. There was a grating, as from metal long unused, and a block fell back, opening a narrow door to them.

Before she stepped within, the priestess lifted her hand above her head and when she withdrew it, the sun and planets remained to form a diadem just above the intricate braiding of her dull

red hair. As she moved into the secret way, the five orbs swung with her, and in the darkness there the sun glowed richly, sending out a light to guide their feet.

They were at the top of a stairway and the hollow clang of the stone as it moved back into place behind them echoed through a gulf which seemed endless. But that too was as the chronicles had said and Varta knew no fear.

How long they journeyed down into the maw of the mountain and, beyond that, into the womb of Erb itself, Varta never knew. But, when feet were weary and she knew the bite of real hunger, they came into a passageway which ended in a room hollowed of solid rock. And there, preserved in the chest in which men born in the youth of Memphir had laid them, Varta found that which would keep her safe on the path she must take. She put aside the fine silks, the jeweled cincture, which had been the badge of Asti's service and drew on over her naked body a suit of scaled skin, gemmed and glistening in the rays of the small sun. There was a hood to cover the entire head, taloned gloves for the hands, webbed, clawed coverings for the feet—as if the skin of a giant, man-like lizard had been tanned and fashioned into this suit. And Varta suspected that that might be so—the world of Erb had not always been held by the human-kind alone.

There were supplies here too, lying untouched in ageless containers within a lizard-skin pouch. Varta touched her tongue without fear to a powdered restorative, sharing it with Lur, whose own mailed skin would protect him through the dangers to come.

She folded the regalia she had stripped off and laid it in the chest, smoothing it regretfully before she dropped the lid upon its shimmering color. Never again would Asti's servant wear the soft stuff of His Livery. But she was resolute enough when she picked up the food pouch and strode forward, passing out of the robing chamber into a narrow way which was a natural fault in the rock unsmoothed by the tools of man.

But when this rocky road ended upon the lip of a gorge, Varta hesitated, plucking at the throat latch of her hood-like helmet. Through the unclouded crystal of its eye-holes she could see the sprouts of yellow vapor which puffed from crannies in the rock wall down which she must climb. If the records of the Temple spoke true, these curls of gas were death to all lunged creatures of the upper world. She could only trust that the cunning of the scaled hood would not fail her.

The long talons fitted to the finger tips of the gloves, the claws of the webbed foot coverings clamped fast to every hand and foot hold, but the way down was long and she caught a message of weariness from Lur before they reached the piled rocks at the foot of the cliff. The puffs of steamy gas had become a fog through which they groped their way slowly, following a trace of path along the base of the cliff.

Time did not exist in the underworld

of Erb. Varta did not know whether it was still today, or whether she had passed into tomorrow when they came to a cross roads. She felt Lur press against her, forcing her back against a rock.

"There is a thing coming—" his message was clear.

And in a moment she too saw a dark hulk nosing through the vapor. It moved slowly, seeming to balance at each step as if travel was a painful act. But it bore steadily to the meeting of the two paths.

"It is no enemy—" But she did not need that reassurance from Lur. Unearthly as the thing looked it had no menace.

With a last twist of ungainly body the creature squatted on a rock and clawed the clumsy covering it wore about its bone-thin shoulders and domed-skull head. The visage it revealed was long and gray, with dark pits for eyes and a gaping, fang-studded, lipless mouth.

"Who are you who dare to tread the forgotten ways and rouse from slumber the Guardian of the Chasms?"

The question was a shrill whine in her brain, her hands half arose to cover her ears—

"I am Varta, Maiden of Asti. Memphir has fallen to the barbarians of the Outer Lands and now I go, as Asti once ordered—."

The Guardian considered her answer gravely. In one skeleton claw it fumbled a rod and with this it now traced certain symbols in the dust before Varta's webbed feet. When it had done, the girl stooped and altered two of the lines with a swift stroke from one of her talons. The creature of the Chasm nodded its misshapen head.

"Asti does not rule here. But long, and long, and long ago there was a pact made with us in His Name. Pass free from us, woman of the Light. There are two paths before you—."

The Guardian paused for so long that Varta dared to prompt it.

"Where do they lead, Guardian of the Dark?"

"This will take you down into my country," it jerked the rod to the right. "And that way is death for creatures from the surface world. The other—in our old legends it is said to bring a traveler out into the upper world. Of the truth of that I have no proof."

"But that one I must take," she made slight obeisance to the huddle of bones and dank cloak on the rock and it inclined its head in grave courtesy.

With Lur pushing a little ahead, she took the road which ran straight into the flume-veiled darkness. Nor did she turn to look again at the Thing from the Chasm world.

They began to climb again, across slimed rock where there were evil trails of other things which lived in this haunted darkness. But the sun of Asti lighted their way and perhaps some virtue in the rays from it kept away the makers of such trails.

When they pulled themselves up onto a wide ledge the talons on Varta's gloves were worn to splintered stubs and there was a bright girdle of pain about her aching body. Lur lay panting

beside her, his red-forked tongue protruding from his foam ringed mouth.

"We walk again the ways of men," Lur was the first to note the tool marks on the stone where they lay. "By the Will of Asti, we may win out of this maze after all."

Since there were no signs of the deadly steam Varta dared to push off her hood and share with her companion the sustaining power she carried in her pouch. There was a freshness to the air they breathed, damp and cold though it was, which hinted of the upper world.

The ledge sloped upwards, at a steep angle at first, and then more gently. Lur slipped past her and thrust head and shoulders through a break in the rock. Grasping his neck spines she allowed him to pull her through that narrow slit into the soft blackness of a surface night. They tumbled down together, Varta's head pillowed on Lur's smooth side, and so slept as the sun and worlds of Asti whirled protectingly above them.

A whir of wings in the air above her head awakened Varta. One of the small, jewel bright flying lizard creatures of the deep jungle poised and dipped to investigate more closely the worlds of Asti. But at Varta's upflung arm it uttered a rasping cry and planed down into the mass of vegetation below. By the glint of sunlight on the stone around them the day was already well advanced. Varta tugged at Lur's mane until he roused.

There was a regularity to the rocks piled about their sleeping place which hinted that they had lain among the ruins left by man. But of this side of the mountains both were ignorant, for Memphir's rule had not run here.

"Many dead things in times past," Lur's scarlet nostril pits were extended to their widest. "But that was long ago. This land is no longer held by men."

Varta laughed cheerfully. "If here there are no men, then there will rise no barbarian hordes to dispute our rule. Asti has led us to safety. Let us see more of the land He gives us."

There was a road leading down from the ruins, a road still to be followed in spite of the lash of landslip and the crack of time. And it brought them into a cup of green fertility where the lavishness of Asti's sowing was unchecked by man. Varta seized eagerly upon globes of blood red fruit which she recognized as delicacies which had been cultivated in the Temple gardens, while Lur went hunting into the fringes of the jungle, there dining on prey so easily caught as to be judged devoid of fear.

The jungle choked highway curved and they were suddenly fronted by a desert of sere desolation, a desert floored by glassy slag which sent back the sun beams in a furnace glare. Varta shaded her eyes and tried to see the end of this, but, if there was a distant rim of green beyond, the heat distortions in the air concealed it.

Lur put out a front paw to test the slag but withdrew it instantly.

"It cooks the flesh, we can not walk here," was his verdict.

Varta pointed with her chin to the left where, some distance away, the moun-

tain wall paralleled their course.

"Then let us keep to the jungle over there and see if it does not bring around to the far side. But what made this—?" She leaned out over the glassy stuff, not daring to touch the slick surface.

"War." Lur's tongue shot out to impale a questing beetle. "These forgotten people fought with fearsome weapons."

"But what weapon could do this? Memphir knew not such—."

"Memphir was old. But mayhap there were those who raised cities on Erb before the first hut of Memphir squatted on tidal mud. Men forget knowledge in time. Even in Memphir the lords of the last days forgot the wisdom of their earlier sages—they fell before the barbarians easily enough."

"If ever men had wisdom to produce this—it was not of Asti's giving," she edged away from the glare. "Let us go."

But now they had to fight their way through jungle and it was hard—until they reached a ridge of rock running out from the mountain as a tongue thrust into the blasted valley. And along this they picked their slow way.

"There is water near—," Lur's thought answered the girl's desire. She licked dry lips longingly. "This way—," her companion's sudden turn was to the left and Varta was quick to follow him down a slide of rock.

Lur's instinct was right, as it ever was. There was water before them, a small lake of it. But even as he dipped his fanged muzzle toward that inviting surface, Lur's spined head jerked erect again. Varta snatched back the hand she had put out, staring at Lur's strange actions. His nostrils expanded to their widest, his long neck outstretched, he was swinging his head back and forth across the limpid shallows.

"What is it—?"

"This is no water such as we know," the scaled one answered flatly. "It has life within it."

Varta laughed. "Fish, water snakes, your own distant kin, Lur. It is the scent of them which you catch—"

"No. It is the water itself which lives—and yet does not live—" His thought trailed away from her as he struggled with some problem. No human brain could follow his unless he willed it so.

Varta squatted back on her heels and began to look at the water and then at the banks with more care. For the first time she noted the odd patches of brilliant color which floated just below the surface of the liquid. Blue, green, yellow, crimson, they drifted slowly with the tiny waves which lapped the shore. But they were not alive, she was almost sure of that, they appeared more a part of the water itself.

Watching the voyage of one patch of green she caught sight of the branch. It was a drooping shoot of the turbi, the same tree vine which produced the fruit she had relished less than an hour before. Above the water dangled a cluster of the fruit, dead ripe with the sweet pulp stretching its skin. But below the surface of the water—

Varta's breath hissed between her

teeth and Lur's head snapped around as he caught her thought.

The branch below the water bore a perfect circle of green flowers close to its tip, the flowers which the turbi had borne naturally seven months before and which should long ago have turned into just such sweetness as hung above.

With Lur at her heels the girl edged around to pull cautiously at the branch. It yielded at once to her touch, swinging its tip out of the lake. She sniffed—there was a languid perfume in the air, the perfume of the blooming turbi. She examined the flowers closely, to all appearances they were perfect and natural.

"It preserves," Lur settled back on his haunches and waved one front paw at the quiet water. "What goes into it remains as it was just at the moment of entrance."

"But if this is seven months old—"

"It may be seven years old," corrected Lur. "How can you tell when that branch first dipped into the lake? Yet the flowers do not fade even when withdrawn from the water. This is indeed a mystery!"

"Of which I would know more!" Varta dropped the turbi and started on around the edge of the lake.

Twice more they found similar evidence of preservation in flower or leaf, wherever it was covered by the opaline water.

The lake itself was a long and narrow slash with one end cutting into the desert of glass while the other wet the foot of the mountain. And it was there, on the slope of the mountain that they found the greatest wonder of all, Lur scenting it before they sighted the remains among the stones.

"Man made," he cautioned, "but very, very old."

And truly the wreckage they came upon must have been old, perhaps even older than Memphir. For the part which rested above the water was almost gone, rusty red stains on the rocks outlining where it had lain. But under water was a smooth silver hull, shining and untouched by the years. Varta laid her hand upon a ruddy scrap between two rocks and it became a drift of powdery dust. And yet—there a few feet below was strong metal!

Lur padded along the scrap of shore surveying the thing.

"It was a machine in which men traveled," his thoughts arose to her. "But they were not as the men of Memphir. Perhaps not even as the sons of Erb—"

"Not as the sons of Erb!" her astonishment broke into open speech.

Lur's neck twisted as he looked up at her. "Did the men of Erb, even in the old chronicles fight with weapons such as would make a desert of glass? There are other worlds than Erb, mayhap this strange thing was a sky ship from such a world. All things are possible by the Will of Asti."

Varta nodded. "All things are possible by the Will of Asti," she repeated. "But, Lur," her eyes were round with wonder, "perhaps it is Asti's Will which brought us here to find this marvel! Perhaps He has some use for us and it!"

"At least we may discover what lies within it," Lur had his own share of curiosity.

"How? The two of us can not draw that out of the water!"

"No, but we can enter into it!"

Varta fingered the folds of the hood on her shoulders. She knew what Lur meant, the suit which had protected her in the underworld was impervious to everything outside its surface—or to every substance its makers knew—just as Lur's own hide made his flesh impenetrable. But the fashioners of her suit had probably never known of the living lake and what if she had no defense against the strange properties of the water?

She leaned back against a rock. Overhead the worlds and sun of Asti still traveled their appointed paths. The worlds of Asti! If it was His Will which had brought them here, then Asti's power would wrap her round with safety. By His Will she had come out of Memphir over ways no human of Erb had ever trod before. Could she doubt that His Protection was with her now?

It took only a moment to make secure the webbed shoes, to pull on and fasten the hood, to tighten the buckles of her gloves. Then she crept forward, shuddering as the water rose about her ankles. But Lur pushed on before her, his head disappearing fearlessly under the surface as he crawled through the jagged opening in the ship below.

Smashed engines which had no meaning in her eyes occupied most of the broken section of the wreck. None of the metal showed any deterioration beyond that which had occurred at the time of the crash. Under her exploring hands it was firm and whole.

Lur was pulling at a small door half hidden by a mass of twisted wires and plates and, just as Varta crawled around this obstacle to join him, the barrier gave way allowing them to squeeze through into what had once been the living quarters of the ship.

Varta recognized seats, a table, and other bits of strictly utilitarian furniture. But of those who had once been at home there, there remained no trace. Lur, having given one glance to the furnishings, was prowling about the far end of the cabin uncertainly, and now he voiced his uneasiness.

"There is something beyond, something which once had life—"

Varta crowded up to him. To her eyes the wall seemed without line of an opening, and yet Lur was running his broad front paws over it carefully, now and then throwing his weight against the smooth surface.

"There is no door—" she pointed out doubtfully.

"No door—ah—here—" Lur unsheathed formidable fighting claws to their full length for perhaps the first time in his temple-sheltered life, and endeavored to work them into a small crevice. The muscles of his forelegs and quarters stood out in sharp relief under his scales, his fangs were bare as his lips snapped back with effort.

Something gave, a thin black line appeared to mark the edges of a door. Then time, or Lur's strength, broke the

ancient locking mechanism. The door gave so suddenly that they were both sent hurtling backward and Lur's breath burst from him in a huge bubble.

The sealed compartment was hardly more than a cupboard but it was full. Spread-eagled against the wall was a four-limbed creature whose form was so smothered in a bulky suit that Varta could only guess that it was akin in shape to her own. Hoops of metal locked it firmly to the wall, but the head had fallen forward so that the face plate in the helmet was hidden.

Slowly the girl breasted the water which filled the cabin and reached her hands toward the bowed helmet of the prisoner. Gingerly, her blunted talons scraping across metal, she pulled it up to her eye-level.

The eyes of that which stood within the suit were closed, as if in sleep, but there was a warm, healthy tint to the bronze skin, so different in shade to her own pallid coloring. For the rest, the prisoner had the two eyes, the centered nose, the properly shaped mouth which were common to the men of Erb. Hair grew on his head, black and thick and there was a faint shadow of beard on his jaw line.

"This is a man—" her thought reached Lur.

"Why not? Did you expect a serpent? It is a pity he is dead—"

Varta felt a rich warm tide rising in her throat to answer that teasing half question. There were times when Lur's thought reading was annoying, He had risen to his hind legs so that he too could look into the shell which held their find.

"Yes, a pity," he repeated. "But—"

A vision of the turbi flowers swept through her mind. Had Lur suggested it, or had that wild thought been hers alone? Only this ship was so old—so very old!

Lur's red tongue flicked. "It can do no harm to try—" he suggested slyly and set his claws into the hoop holding the captive's right wrist, testing its strength.

"But the metal on the shore, it crumpled into powder at my touch—" she protested. "What if we carry him out only to have—to have—" Her mind shuddered away from the picture which followed.

"Did the turbi blossom fade when pulled out?" countered Lur. "There is a secret to these fastenings—" He pulled and pried impatiently.

Varta tried to help but even their united strength was useless against the force which held the loops in place. Breathless the girl slumped back against the wall of the cabin while Lur settled down on his haunches. One of the odd patches of color drifted by, its vivid scarlet like a jewel spiraling lazily upward. Varta's eyes followed its drift and so were guided to what she had forgotten, the worlds of Asti.

"Asti!"

Lur was looking up too.

"The power of Asti!"

Varta's hand went up, rested for a long moment under the sun and then drew it down, carefully, slowly, as she had in Memphir's temple. Then she

stepped towards the captive. Within her hood a beaded line of moisture outlined her lips, a pulse thundered on her temple. This was a fearsome thing to try.

She held the sun on a line with one of the wrist bonds, She must avoid the flesh it imprisoned, for Asti's power could kill.

From the sun there shot an orange-red beam to strike full upon the metal. A thin line of red crept across the smooth hoop, crept and widened. Varta raised her hand, sending the sun spinning up and Lur's claws pulled on the metal. It broke like rotten wood in his grasp.

The girl gave a little gasp of half-terrified delight. Then the old legends were true! As Asti's priestess she controlled powers too great to guess. Swiftly she loosed the other hoops and restored the sun and worlds to their place over her head as the captive slumped across the threshold of his cell.

Tugging and straining they brought him out of the broken ship into the sunlight of Erb. Varta threw back her hood and breathed deeply of the air which was not manufactured by the wizardry of the lizard skin and Lur sat panting, his nostril flaps open. It was he who spied the spring on the mountain side above, a spring of water uncontaminated by the strange life of the lake. They both dragged themselves there to drink deeply.

Varta returned to the lake shore reluctantly. Within her heart she believed that the man they had brought from the ship was truly dead. Lur might hold out the promise of the flowers, but this was a man and he had lain in the water for countless ages—

So she went with lagging steps, to find Lur busy. He had solved the mystery of the space suit and had stripped it from the unknown. Now his clawed paw rested lightly on the bared chest and he turned to Varta eagerly.

"There is life—"

Hardly daring to believe that, she dropped down beside Lur and touched their prize. Lur was right, the flesh was warm and she had caught the faint rhythm of shallow breath. Half remembering old tales, she put her hands on the arch of the lower ribs and began to aid that rhythm. The breaths were deeper—

Then the man half turned, his arm moved. Varta and Lur drew back. For the first time the girl probed gently the sleeping mind before her—even as she had read the minds of those few of Memphir who had ascended to the temple precincts in the last days.

Much of what she read now was confused or so alien to Erb that it had no meaning for her. But she saw a great city plunged into flaming death in an instant and felt the horror and remorse of the man at her feet because of his own part in that act, the horror and remorse which had led him to open rebellion and so to his imprisonment. There was a last dark and frightening memory of a door closing on light and hope—

The space man moaned softly and hunched his shoulders as if he struggled vainly to tear loose from bonds.

"He thinks that he is still prisoner,"

observed Lur. "For him life begins at the very point it ended—even as it did for the turbi flowers. See—now he awakens."

The eyelids rose slowly, as if the man hated to see what he must look upon. Then, as he sighted Varta and Lur, his eyes went wide. He pulled himself up and looked dazedly around, striking out wildly with his fists. Catching sight of the clumsy suit Lur had taken from him he pulled at it, looking at the two before him as if he feared some attack.

Varta turned to Lur for help. She might read minds and use the wordless speech of Lur. But his people knew the art of such communication long before the first priest of Asti had stumbled upon their secret. Let Lur now quiet this outlander.

Delicately Lur sought a way into the other's mind, twisting down paths of thought strange to him. Even Varta could not follow the subtile waves sent forth in the quick examination and reconnoitering, nor could she understand all of the conversation which resulted. For the man from the ancient ship answered in speech aloud, sharp harsh sounds of no meaning. It was only after repeated instruction from Lur that he began to frame his messages in his mind, clumsily and disconnectedly.

Pictures of another world, another solar system, began to grow more clear as the space man became more at home in the new way of communication. He was one of a race who had come to Erb from beyond the stars and discovered it a world without human life: So they had established colonies and built great cities—far different from Memphir—and had lived in peace for centuries of their own time.

Then on the faraway planet of their birth there had begun a great war, a war which brought flaming death to all that world. The survivors of a last battle in outer space had fled to the colonies on Erb. But among this handful were men driven mad by the death of their world, and these had blasted the cities of Erb, saying that their kind must be wiped out.

The man they had rescued had turned against one such maddened leader and had been imprisoned just before an attack upon the largest of the colony's cities. After that he remembered nothing.

Varta stopped trying to follow the conversation—Lur was only explaining now how they had found the space man and brought him out of the wrecked ship. No human on Erb, this one had said, and yet were there not her own people, the ones who had built Memphir? And what of the barbarians, who, ruthless and cruel as they seemed by the standards of Memphir, were indeed men? Whence had they come then, the men of Memphir and the ancestors of the barbarian hordes? Her hands touched the scaled skin of the suit she still wore and then rubbed across her own smooth flesh. Could one have come from the other, was she of the blood and heritage of Lur?

"Not so!" Lur's mind, as quick as his flickering tongue, had caught that panic-born thought. "You are of the

blood of this space wanderer. Men from the riven colonies must have escaped to safety. Look at this man, is he not like the men of Memphir—as they were in the olden days of the city's greatness?"

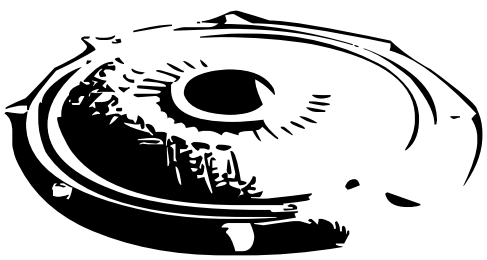
The stranger was tall, taller than the men of Memphir and there was a certain hardness about him which those city dwellers in ease had never displayed. But Lur must be right, this was a man of her race. She smiled in sudden relief and he answered that smile. Lur's soft laughter rang in both their heads.

"Asti in His Infinite Wisdom can see through Centuries. Memphir has fallen because of its softness and the evildoing of its people and the barbarians will now have their way with the lands of the north. But to me it appears that Asti is not yet done with the pattern He was weaving there. To each of you He granted a second life. Do not disdain the Gifts of Asti, Daughter of Erb!"

Again Varta felt the warm tide of blood rise in her cheeks. But she no longer smiled. Instead she regarded the outlander speculatively.

Not even a Maiden of the Temple could withstand the commands of the All Highest. Gifts from the Hand of Asti dared not be thrown away.

Above the puzzlement of the stranger she heard the chuckling of Lur.



The Green Beret

It's not so much the decisions a man does make that mark him as a Man—but the ones he refrains from making. Like the decision "I've had enough!"

Read locked the door and drew his pistol. Sergeant Rashid handed Premier Umluana the warrant.

"We're from the UN Inspector Corps," Sergeant Rashid said. "I'm very sorry, but we have to arrest you and bring you in for trial by the World Court."

If Umluana noticed Read's gun, he didn't show it. He read the warrant carefully. When he finished, he said something in Dutch.

"I don't know your language," Rashid said.

"Then I'll speak English." Umluana was a small man with wrinkled brow, glasses and a mustache. His skin was a shade lighter than Read's. "The Inspector General doesn't have the power to arrest a head of state—especially the Premier of Belderkan. Now, if you'll excuse me, I must return to my party."

In the other room people laughed and talked. Glasses clinked in the late afternoon. Read knew two armed men stood just outside the door. "If you leave, Premier, I'll have to shoot you."

"I don't think so," Umluana said. "No, if you kill me, all Africa will rise against the world. You don't want me dead. You want me in court."

Read clicked off the safety.

"Corporal Read is very young," Rashid said, "but he's a crack shot. That's why I brought him with me. I think he likes to shoot, too."

Umluana turned back to Rashid a second too soon. He saw the sergeant's upraised hand before it collided with his neck.

"Help! Kidnap."

Rashid judo chopped him and swung the inert body over his shoulders. Read pulled a flat grenade from his vest pocket. He dropped it and yellow psycho gas hissed from the valve.

"Let's be off," Rashid said.

The door lock snapped as they went out the window. Two men with rifles plunged into the gas; sighing, they fell to the floor in a catatonic trance.

A little car skimmed across the lawn. Bearing the Scourge of Africa, Rashid struggled toward it. Read walked backward, covering their retreat.

The car stopped, whirling blades holding it a few inches off the lawn. They climbed in.

"How did it go?" The driver and another inspector occupied the front seat.

"They'll be after us in half a minute."

The other inspector carried a light machine gun and a box of grenades. "I better cover," he said.

"Thanks," Rashid said.

The inspector slid out of the car and ran to a clump of bushes. The driver pushed in the accelerator. As they swerved toward the south, Read saw a dozen armed men run out of the house. A grenade arced from the bushes and the pursuers recoiled from the cloud that rose before them.

"Is he all right?" the driver asked.

"I don't think I hurt him." Rashid took a syrette from his vest pocket. "Well, Read, it looks like we're in for a fight. In a few minutes Miaka Station will know we're coming. And God knows what will happen at the Game Preserve."

Read wanted to jump out of the car. He could die any minute. But he had set his life on a well-oiled track and he couldn't get off until they reached Geneva.

"They don't know who's coming," he said. "They don't make them tough enough to stop this boy."

Staring straight ahead, he didn't see the sergeant smile.

Two types of recruits are accepted by the UN Inspector Corps: those with a fanatic loyalty to the ideals of peace and world order, and those who are loyal to nothing but themselves. Read was the second type.

A tall, lanky Negro he had spent his school days in one of the drab suburbs that ring every prosperous American city. It was the home of factory workers, clerks, semiskilled technicians, all who do the drudge work of civilization and know they will never do more. The adults spent their days with television, alcohol and drugs; the young spent their days with gangs, sex, television and alcohol. What else was there? Those who could have told him neither studied nor taught at his schools. What he saw on the concrete fields between the tall apartment houses marked the limits of life's

possibilities.

He had belonged to a gang called The Golden Spacemen. "Nobody fools with me," he bragged. "When Harry Read's out, there's a tiger running loose." No one knew how many times he nearly ran from other clubs, how carefully he picked the safest spot on the battle line.

"A man ought to be a man," he once told a girl. "He ought to do a man's work. Did you ever notice how our fathers look, how they sleep so much? I don't want to be like that. I want to be something proud."

He joined the UN Inspector Corps at eighteen, in 1978. The international cops wore green berets, high buttonless boots, bush jackets. They were very special men.

For the first time in his life, his father said something about his ambitions.

"Don't you like America, Harry? Do you want to be without a country? This is the best country in the world. All my life I've made a good living. Haven't you had everything you ever wanted? I've been a king compared to people overseas. Why, you stay here and go to trade school and in two years you'll be living just like me."

"I don't want that," Read said.

"What do you mean, you don't want that?"

"You could join the American Army," his mother said. "That's as good as a trade school. If you have to be a soldier."

"I want to be a UN man. I've already enlisted. I'm in! What do you care what I do?"

The UN Inspector Corps had been founded to enforce the Nuclear Disarmament Treaty of 1966. Through the years it had acquired other jobs. UN men no longer went unarmed. Trained to use small arms and gas weapons, they guarded certain borders, bodyguarded diplomats and UN officials, even put down riots that threatened international peace. As the UN evolved into a strong world government, the UN Inspector Corps steadily acquired new powers.

Read went through six months training on Madagascar.

Twice he nearly got expelled for picking fights with smaller men. Rather than resign, he accepted punishment which assigned him to weeks of dull, filthy extra labor. He hated the restrictions and the iron fence of regulations. He hated boredom, loneliness and isolation.

And yet he responded with enthusiasm. They had given him a job. A job many people considered important.

He took his turn guarding the still disputed borders of Korea. He served on the rescue teams that patrol the busy Polar routes. He mounted guard at the 1980 World's Fair in Rangoon.

"I liked Rangoon," he even told a friend. "I even liked Korea. But I think I liked the Pole job best. You sit around playing cards and shooting the bull and then there's a plane crash or something and you go out and win a medal. That's great for me. I'm lazy and I like excitement."

One power implied in the UN Char-

ter no Secretary General or Inspector General had ever tried to use. The power to arrest any head of state whose country violated international law. Could the World Court try and imprison a politician who had conspired to attack another nation?

For years Africa had been called "The South America of the Old World." Revolution followed revolution. Colonies became democracies. Democracies became dictatorships or dissolved in civil war. Men planted bases on the moon and in four years, 1978-82, ringed the world with matter transmitters; but the black population of Africa still struggled toward political equality.

Umluana took control of Belderkan in 1979. The tiny, former Dutch colony, had been a tottering democracy for ten years. The very day he took control the new dictator and his African party began to build up the Belderkan Army. For years he had preached a new Africa, united, free of white masters, the home of a vigorous and perfect Negro society. His critics called him a hypocritical racist, an opportunist using the desires of the African people to build himself an empire.

He began a propaganda war against neighboring South Africa, promising the liberation of that strife-torn land. Most Negro leaders, having just won representation in the South African Parliament, told him to liberate his own country. They believed they could use their first small voice in the government to win true freedom for their people.

But the radio assault and the arms buildup continued. Early in 1982, South Africa claimed the Belderkan Army exceeded the size agreed to in the Disarmament Treaty. The European countries and some African nations joined in the accusation. China called the uproar a vicious slur on a new African nation. The United States and Russia, trying not to get entangled, asked for more investigation by the UN.

But the evidence was clear. Umluana was defying world law. If he got away with it, some larger and more dangerous nation might follow his precedent. And the arms race would begin again.

The Inspector General decided. They would enter Belderkan, arrest Umluana and try him by due process before the World Court. If the plan succeeded, mankind would be a long step farther from nuclear war.

Read didn't know much about the complicated political reasons for the arrest. He liked the Corp and he liked being in the Corp. He went where they sent him and did what they told him to do.

The car skimmed above the treetops. The driver and his two passengers scanned the sky.

A plane would have been a faster way to get out of the country. But then they would have spent hours flying over Africa, with Belderkan fighters in hot pursuit, other nations joining the chase and the world uproar gaining volume. By transmitter, if all went well, they could have Umluana in Geneva in an hour.

They were racing toward Miaka, a

branch transmitter station. From Miaka they would transmit to the Belderkan Preserve, a famous tourist attraction whose station could transmit to any point on the globe. Even now a dozen inspectors were taking over the Game Preserve station and manning its controls.

They had made no plans to take over Miaka. They planned to get there before it could be defended.

"There's no military base near Miaka," Rashid said. "We might get there before the Belderkans."

"Here comes our escort," Read said.

A big car rose from the jungle. This one had a recoilless rifle mounted on the roof. The driver and the gunner waved and fell in behind them.

"One thing," Read said, "I don't think they'll shoot at us while he's in the car."

"Don't be certain, corporal. All these strong-arm movements are alike. I'll bet Umluana's lieutenants are hoping he'll become a dead legend. Then they can become live conquerors."

Sergeant Rashid came from Cairo. He had degrees in science and history from Cambridge but only the Corp gave him work that satisfied his conscience. He hated war. It was that simple.

Read looked back. He saw three spots of sunlight about two hundred feet up and a good mile behind.

"Here they come, Sarge."

Rashid turned his head. He waved frantically. The two men in the other car waved back.

"Shall I duck under the trees?" the driver asked.

"Not yet. Not until we have to."

Read fingered the machine gun he had picked up when he got in the car. He had never been shot at. Twice he had faced an unarmed mob, but a few shots had sent them running.

Birds flew screaming from their nests. Monkeys screeched and threw things at the noisy, speeding cars. A little cloud of birds surrounded each vehicle.

The escort car made a sharp turn and charged their pursuers. The big rifle fired twice. Read saw the Belderkan cars scatter. Suddenly machine-gun bullets cracked and whined beside him.

"Evade," Rashid said. "Don't go down."

Without losing any forward speed, the driver took them straight up. Read's stomach bounced.

A shell exploded above them. The car rocked. He raised his eyes and saw a long crack in the roof.

"Hit the floor," Rashid said.

They knelt on the cramped floor. Rashid put on his gas mask and Read copied him. Umluana breathed like a furnace, still unconscious from the injection Rashid had given him.

I can't do anything, Read thought. They're too far away to shoot back. All we can do is run.

The sky was clear and blue. The jungle was a noisy bazaar of color. In the distance guns crashed. He listened to shells whistle by and the whipcrack of machine-gun bullets. The car roller-coastered up and down. Every time a

shell passed, he crawled in waves down his own back.

Another explosion, this time very loud.

Rashid raised his eyes above the seat and looked out the rear window. "Two left. Keep down, Read."

"Can't we go down?" Read said.

"They'll get to Miaka before us."

He shut his eyes when he heard another loud explosion.

Sergeant Rashid looked out the window again. He swore bitterly in English and Egyptian. Read raised his head. The two cars behind them weren't fighting each other. A long way back the treetops burned.

"How much farther?" Rashid said. The masks muffled their voices.

"There it is now. Shall I take us right in?"

"I think you'd better."

The station was a glass diamond in a small clearing. The driver slowed down, then crashed through the glass walls and hovered by the transmitter booth.

Rashid opened the door and threw out two grenades. Read jumped out and the two of them struggled toward the booth with Umluana. The driver, pistol in hand, ran for the control panel.

There were three technicians in the station and no passengers. All three panicked when the psycho gas enveloped them. They ran howling for the jungle.

Through the window of his mask, Read saw their pursuers land in the clearing. Machine-gun bullets raked the building. They got Umluana in the booth and hit the floor. Read took aim and opened fire on the largest car.

"Now, I can shoot back," he said. "Now we'll see what they do."

"Are you ready, Rashid?" yelled the driver.

"Man, get us out of here!"

The booth door shut. When it opened, they were at the Game Preserve.

The station jutted from the side of a hill. A glass-walled waiting room surrounded the bank of transmitter booths. Read looked out the door and saw his first battlefield.

Directly in front of him, his head shattered by a bullet, a dead inspector lay behind an overturned couch.

Read had seen dozens of training films taken during actual battles or after atomic attacks. He had laughed when other recruits complained. "That's the way this world is. You people with the weak stomachs better get used to it."

Now he slid against the rear wall of the transmitter booth.

A wounded inspector crawled across the floor to the booth. Read couldn't see his wound, only the pain scratched on his face and the blood he deposited on the floor.

"Did you get Umluana?" he asked Sergeant Rashid.

"He's in the booth. What's going on?" Rashid's Middle East Oxford seemed more clipped than ever.

"They hit us with two companies of

troops a few minutes ago. I think half our men are wounded."

"Can we get out of here?"

"They machine-gunned the controls."

Rashid swore. "You heard him, Read! Get out there and help those men."

He heard the screams of the wounded, the crack of rifles and machine guns, all the terrifying noise of war. But since his eighteenth year he had done everything his superiors told him to do.

He started crawling toward an easychair that looked like good cover. A bullet cracked above his head, so close he felt the shock wave. He got up, ran panicky, crouched, and dove behind the chair.

An inspector cracked the valve on a smoke grenade. A white fog spread through the building. They could see anyone who tried to rush them but the besiegers couldn't pick out targets.

Above the noise, he heard Rashid.

"I'm calling South Africa Station for a copter. It's the only way out of here. Until it comes, we've got to hold them back."

Read thought of the green beret he had stuffed in his pocket that morning. He stuck it on his head and cocked it. He didn't need plain clothes anymore and he wanted to wear at least a part of his uniform.

Bullets had completely shattered the wall in front of him. He stared through the murk, across the broken glass. He was Corporal Harry Read, UN Inspector Corps—a very special man. If he didn't do a good job here, he wasn't the man he claimed to be. This might be the only real test he would ever face.

He heard a shout in rapid French. He turned to his right. Men in red loincloths ran zigzagging toward the station. They carried light automatic rifles. Half of them wore gas masks.

"Shoot the masks," he yelled. "Aim for the masks."

The machine gun kicked and chattered on his shoulder. He picked a target and squeezed off a burst. Tensely, he hunted for another mask. Three grenades arced through the air and yellow gas spread across the battlefield. The attackers ran through it. A few yards beyond the gas, some of them turned and ran for their own lines. In a moment only half a dozen masked men still advanced. The inspectors fired a long, noisy volley. When they stopped only four attackers remained on their feet. And they were running for cover.

The attackers had come straight up a road that led from the Game Preserve to the station. They had not expected any resistance. The UN men had already taken over the station, chased out the passengers and technicians and taken up defense positions; they had met the Belderkans with a dozen grenades and sent them scurrying for cover. The fight so far had been vicious but disorganized. But the Belderkans had a few hundred men and knew they had wrecked the transmitter controls.

The first direct attack had been repulsed. They could attack many more

times and continue to spray the building with bullets. They could also try to go around the hill and attack the station from above; if they did, the inspectors had a good view of the hill and should see them going up.

The inspectors had taken up good defensive positions. In spite of their losses, they still had enough firepower to cover the area surrounding the station.

Read surveyed his sector of fire. About two hundred yards to his left, he saw the top of a small ditch. Using the ditch for cover, the Belderkans could sneak to the top of the hill.

Gas grenades are only three inches long. They hold cubic yards of gas under high pressure. Read unclipped a telescoping rod from his vest pocket. He opened it and a pair of sights flipped up. A thin track ran down one side.

He had about a dozen grenades left, three self-propelling. He slid an SP grenade into the rod's track and estimated windage and range. Sighting carefully, not breathing, muscles relaxed, the rod rock steady, he fired and lobbed the little grenade into the ditch. He dropped another grenade beside it.

The heavy gas would lie there for hours.

Sergeant Rashid ran crouched from man to man. He did what he could to shield the wounded.

"Well, corporal, how are you?"

"Not too bad, sergeant. See that ditch out there? I put a little gas in it."

"Good work. How's your ammunition?"

"A dozen grenades. Half a barrel of shells."

"The copter will be here in half an hour. We'll put Umluana on, then try to save ourselves. Once he's gone, I think we ought to surrender."

"How do you think they'll treat us?"

"That we'll have to see."

An occasional bullet cracked and whined through the misty room. Near him a man gasped frantically for air. On the sunny field a wounded man screamed for help.

"There's a garage downstairs," Rashid said. "In case the copter doesn't get here on time, I've got a man filling wine bottles with gasoline."

"We'll stop them, Sarge. Don't worry."

Rashid ran off. Read stared across the green land and listened to the pound of his heart. What were the Belderkans planning? A mass frontal attack? To sneak in over the top of the hill?

He didn't think, anymore than a rabbit thinks when it lies hiding from the fox or a panther thinks when it crouches on a branch above the trail. His skin tightened and relaxed on his body.

"Listen," said a German.

Far down the hill he heard the deep-throated rumble of a big motor.

"Armor," the German said.

The earth shook. The tank rounded the bend. Read watched the squat, angular monster until its stubby gun pointed at the station. It stopped less than two hundred yards away.

A loud-speaker blared.

ATTENTION UN SOLDIERS. ATTENTION UN SOLDIERS. YOU MAY THINK US SAVAGES BUT WE HAVE MODERN WEAPONS. WE HAVE ATOMIC WARHEADS, ALL GASES, ROCKETS AND FLAME THROWERS. IF YOU DO NOT SURRENDER OUR PREMIER, WE WILL DESTROY YOU.

"They know we don't have any big weapons," Read said. "They know we have only gas grenades and small arms."

He looked nervously from side to side. They couldn't bring the copter in with that thing squatting out there.

A few feet away, sprawled behind a barricade of tables, lay a man in advanced shock. His deadly white skin shone like ivory. They wouldn't even look like that. One nuclear shell from that gun and they'd be vaporized. Or perhaps the tank had sonic projectors; then the skin would peel off their bones. Or they might be burned, or cut up by shrapnel, or gassed with some new mist their masks couldn't filter.

Read shut his eyes. All around him he heard heavy breathing, mumbled comments, curses. Clothes rustled as men moved restlessly.

But already the voice of Sergeant Rashid resounded in the murky room.

"We've got to knock that thing out before the copter comes. Otherwise, he can't land. I have six Molotov cocktails here. Who wants to go hunting with me?"

For two years Read had served under Sergeant Rashid. To him, the sergeant was everything a UN inspector should be. Rashid's devotion to peace had no limits.

Read's psych tests said pride alone drove him on. That was good enough for the UN; they only rejected men whose loyalties might conflict with their duties. But an assault on the tank required something more than a hunger for self-respect.

Read had seen the inspector who covered their getaway. He had watched their escort charge three-to-one odds. He had seen another inspector stay behind at Miaka Station. And here, in this building, lay battered men and dead men.

All UN inspectors. All part of his life.

And he was part of their life. Their blood, their sacrifice, and pain, had become a part of him.

"I'll take a cocktail, Sarge."

"Is that Read?"

"Who else did you expect?"

"Nobody. Anybody else?"

"I'll go," the Frenchman said. "Three should be enough. Give us a good smoke screen."

Rashid snapped orders. He put the German inspector in charge of Umluana. Read, the Frenchman and himself, he stationed at thirty-foot intervals along the floor.

"Remember," Rashid said. "We have to knock out that gun."

Read had given away his machine gun. He held a gas-filled bottle in each hand. His automatic nestled in its shoulder holster.

Rashid whistled.

Dozens of smoke grenades tumbled through the air. Thick mist engulfed the tank. Read stood up and ran forward. He crouched but didn't zigzag. Speed counted most here.

Gunfire shook the hill. The Belderkans couldn't see them but they knew what was going on and they fired systematically into the smoke.

Bullets ploughed the ground beside him. He raised his head and found the dim silhouette of the tank. He tried not to think about bullets ploughing through his flesh.

A bullet slammed into his hip. He fell on his back, screaming. "Sarge. Sarge."

"I'm hit, too," Rashid said. "Don't stop if you can move."

Listen to him. What's he got, a sprained ankle?

But he didn't feel any pain. He closed his eyes and threw himself onto his stomach. And nearly fainted from pain. He screamed and quivered. The pain stopped. He stretched out his hands, gripping the wine bottles, and inched forward. Pain stabbed him from stomach to knee.

"I can't move, Sarge."

"Read, you've got to. I think you're the only—"

"What?"

Guns clattered. Bullets cracked.

"Sergeant Rashid! Answer me."

He heard nothing but the lonely passage of the bullets in the mist.

"I'm a UN man," he mumbled. "You people up there know what a UN man is? You know what happens when you meet one?"

When he reached the tank, he had another bullet in his right arm. But they didn't know he was coming and when you get within ten feet of a tank, the men inside can't see you.

He just had to stand up and drop the bottle down the gun barrel. That was all—with a broken hip and a wounded right arm.

He knew they would see him when he stood up but he didn't think about that. He didn't think about Sergeant Rashid, about the complicated politics of Africa, about crowded market streets. He had to kill the tank. That was all he thought about. He had decided something in the world was more important than himself, but he didn't know it or realize the psychologists would be surprised to see him do this. He had made many decisions in the last few minutes. He had ceased to think about them or anything else.

With his cigarette lighter, he lit the rag stuffed in the end of the bottle.

Biting his tongue, he pulled himself up the front of the tank. His long arm stretched for the muzzle of the gun. He tossed the bottle down the dark throat.

As he fell, the machine-gun bullets hit him in the chest, then in the neck. He didn't feel them. He had fainted the moment he felt the bottle leave his hand.

The copter landed ten minutes later. Umluana left in a shower of bullets. A Russian private, the ranking man alive in the station, surrendered the survivors to the Belderkans.

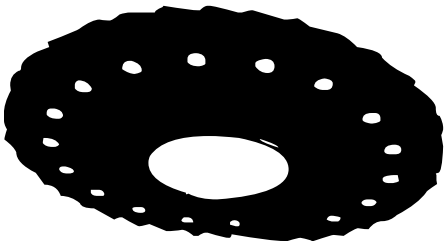
His mother hung the Global Medal

above the television set.

"He must have been brave," she said. "We had a fine son."

"He was our only son," her husband said. "What did he volunteer for? Couldn't somebody else have done it?"

His wife started to cry. Awkwardly, he embraced her. He wondered what his son had wanted that he couldn't get at home.



THE GUN

Nothing moved or stirred. Everything was silent, dead. Only the gun showed signs of life ... and the trespassers had wrecked that for all time. The return journey to pick up the treasure would be a cinch ... they smiled.

The Captain peered into the eyepiece of the telescope. He adjusted the focus quickly.

"It was an atomic fission we saw, all right," he said presently. He sighed and pushed the eyepiece away. "Any of you who wants to look may do so. But it's not a pretty sight."

"Let me look," Tance the archeologist said. He bent down to look, squinting. "Good Lord!" He leaped violently back, knocking against Dorle, the Chief Navigator.

"Why did we come all this way, then?" Dorle asked, looking around at the other men. "There's no point even in landing. Let's go back at once."

"Perhaps he's right," the biologist murmured. "But I'd like to look for myself, if I may." He pushed past Tance and peered into the sight.

He saw a vast expanse, an endless surface of gray, stretching to the edge of the planet. At first he thought it was water but after a moment he realized that it was slag, pitted, fused slag, broken only by hills of rock jutting up at intervals. Nothing moved or stirred. Everything was silent, dead.

"I see," Fomar said, backing away from the eyepiece. "Well, I won't find any legumes there." He tried to smile, but his lips stayed unmoved. He stepped away and stood by himself, staring past the others.

"I wonder what the atmospheric sample will show," Tance said.

"I think I can guess," the Captain answered. "Most of the atmosphere is poisoned. But didn't we expect all this? I don't see why we're so surprised. A fission visible as far away as our system must be a terrible thing."

He strode off down the corridor, dignified and expressionless. They watched him disappear into the control room.

As the Captain closed the door the young woman turned. "What did the telescope show? Good or bad?"

"Bad. No life could possibly exist. Atmosphere poisoned, water vaporized, all the land fused."

"Could they have gone underground?"

The Captain slid back the port window so that the surface of the planet under them was visible. The two of them stared down, silent and disturbed. Mile after mile of unbroken ruin stretched out, blackened slag, pitted and scarred, and occasional heaps of rock.

Suddenly Nasha jumped. "Look! Over there, at the edge. Do you see it?"

They stared. Something rose up, not rock, not an accidental formation. It was round, a circle of dots, white pellets on the dead skin of the planet. A city? Buildings of some kind?

"Please turn the ship," Nasha said excitedly. She pushed her dark hair from her face. "Turn the ship and let's see what it is!"

The ship turned, changing its course. As they came over the white dots the Captain lowered the ship, dropping it down as much as he dared. "Piers," he said. "Piers of some sort of stone. Perhaps poured artificial stone. The remains of a city."

"Oh, dear," Nasha murmured. "How awful." She watched the ruins disappear behind them. In a half-circle the white squares jutted from the slag, chipped and cracked, like broken teeth.

"There's nothing alive," the Captain said at last. "I think we'll go right back; I know most of the crew want to. Get the Government Receiving Station on the sender and tell them what we found, and that we—"

He staggered.

The first atomic shell had struck the ship, spinning it around. The Captain fell to the floor, crashing into the control table. Papers and instruments rained down on him. As he started to his feet the second shell struck. The ceiling cracked open, struts and girders twisted and bent. The ship shuddered, falling suddenly down, then righting itself as automatic controls took over.

The Captain lay on the floor by the smashed control board. In the corner Nasha struggled to free herself from the debris.

Outside the men were already sealing the gaping leaks in the side of the ship, through which the precious air was rushing, dissipating into the void beyond. "Help me!" Dorle was shouting. "Fire over here, wiring ignited." Two men came running. Tance watched helplessly, his eyeglasses broken and bent.

"So there is life here, after all," he said, half to himself. "But how could—"

"Give us a hand," Fomar said, hurrying past. "Give us a hand, we've got to land the ship!"

It was night. A few stars glinted above them, winking through the drifting silt that blew across the surface of the planet.

Dorle peered out, frowning. "What a place to be stuck in." He resumed his work, hammering the bent metal hull of the ship back into place. He was wearing a pressure suit; there were still many small leaks, and radioactive particles from the atmosphere had already found their way into the ship.

Nasha and Fomar were sitting at the table in the control room, pale and solemn, studying the inventory lists.

"Low on carbohydrates," Fomar said. "We can break down the stored fats if we want to, but—"

"I wonder if we could find anything outside." Nasha went to the window. "How uninviting it looks." She paced back and forth, very slender and small, her face dark with fatigue. "What do you suppose an exploring party would find?"

Fomar shrugged. "Not much. Maybe a few weeds growing in cracks here and there. Nothing we could use. Anything that would adapt to this environment would be toxic, lethal."

Nasha paused, rubbing her cheek. There was a deep scratch there, still red and swollen. "Then how do you explain—it? According to your theory the inhabitants must have died in their skins, fried like yams. But who fired on us? Somebody detected us, made a decision, aimed a gun."

"And gauged distance," the Captain said feebly from the cot in the corner. He turned toward them. "That's the part that worries me. The first shell put us out of commission, the second almost destroyed us. They were well aimed, perfectly aimed. We're not such an easy target."

"True." Fomar nodded. "Well, perhaps we'll know the answer before we leave here. What a strange situation! All our reasoning tells us that no life could exist; the whole planet burned dry, the atmosphere itself gone, completely poisoned."

"The gun that fired the projectiles survived," Nasha said. "Why not people?"

"It's not the same. Metal doesn't need air to breathe. Metal doesn't get leukemia from radioactive particles. Metal doesn't need food and water."

There was silence.

"A paradox," Nasha said. "Anyhow, in the morning I think we should send out a search party. And meanwhile we should keep on trying to get the ship in condition for the trip back."

"It'll be days before we can take off," Fomar said. "We should keep every man working here. We can't afford to send out a party."

Nasha smiled a little. "We'll send you in the first party. Maybe you can discover—what was it you were so interested in?"

"Legumes. Edible legumes."

"Maybe you can find some of them. Only—"

"Only what?"

"Only watch out. They fired on us once without even knowing who we were or what we came for. Do you suppose that they fought with each other? Perhaps they couldn't imagine anyone being friendly, under any circumstances. What a strange evolutionary trait, inter-species warfare. Fighting within the race!"

"We'll know in the morning," Fomar said. "Let's get some sleep."

The sun came up chill and austere. The three people, two men and a woman, stepped through the port, dropping down on the hard ground below.

"What a day," Dorle said grumpily.

"I said how glad I'd be to walk on firm ground again, but—"

"Come on," Nasha said. "Up beside me. I want to say something to you. Will you excuse us, Tance?"

Tance nodded gloomily. Dorle caught up with Nasha. They walked together, their metal shoes crunching the ground underfoot. Nasha glanced at him.

"Listen. The Captain is dying. No one knows except the two of us. By the end of the day-period of this planet he'll be dead. The shock did something to his heart. He was almost sixty, you know."

Dorle nodded. "That's bad. I have a great deal of respect for him. You will be captain in his place, of course. Since you're vice-captain now—"

"No. I prefer to see someone else lead, perhaps you or Fomar. I've been thinking over the situation and it seems to me that I should declare myself mated to one of you, whichever of you wants to be captain. Then I could devolve the responsibility."

"Well, I don't want to be captain. Let Fomar do it."

Nasha studied him, tall and blond, striding along beside her in his pressure suit. "I'm rather partial to you," she said. "We might try it for a time, at least. But do as you like. Look, we're coming to something."

They stopped walking, letting Tance catch up. In front of them was some sort of a ruined building. Dorle stared around thoughtfully.

"Do you see? This whole place is a natural bowl, a huge valley. See how the rock formations rise up on all sides, protecting the floor. Maybe some of the great blast was deflected here."

They wandered around the ruins, picking up rocks and fragments. "I think this was a farm," Tance said, examining a piece of wood. "This was part of a tower windmill."

"Really?" Nasha took the stick and turned it over. "Interesting. But let's go; we don't have much time."

"Look," Dorle said suddenly. "Off there, a long way off. Isn't that something?" He pointed.

Nasha sucked in her breath. "The white stones."

"What?"

Nasha looked up at Dorle. "The white stones, the great broken teeth. We saw them, the Captain and I, from the control room." She touched Dorle's arm gently. "That's where they fired from. I didn't think we had landed so close."

"What is it?" Tance said, coming up to them. "I'm almost blind without my glasses. What do you see?"

"The city. Where they fired from."

"Oh." All three of them stood together. "Well, let's go," Tance said. "There's no telling what we'll find there." Dorle frowned at him.

"Wait. We don't know what we would be getting into. They must have patrols. They probably have seen us already, for that matter."

"They probably have seen the ship itself," Tance said. "They probably know right now where they can find it, where they can blow it up. So what difference does it make whether we go

closer or not?"

"That's true," Nasha said. "If they really want to get us we haven't a chance. We have no armaments at all; you know that."

"I have a hand weapon." Dorle nodded. "Well, let's go on, then. I suppose you're right, Tance."

"But let's stay together," Tance said nervously. "Nasha, you're going too fast."

Nasha looked back. She laughed. "If we expect to get there by nightfall we must go fast."

They reached the outskirts of the city at about the middle of the afternoon. The sun, cold and yellow, hung above them in the colorless sky. Dorle stopped at the top of a ridge overlooking the city.

"Well, there it is. What's left of it."

There was not much left. The huge concrete piers which they had noticed were not piers at all, but the ruined foundations of buildings. They had been baked by the searing heat, baked and charred almost to the ground. Nothing else remained, only this irregular circle of white squares, perhaps four miles in diameter.

Dorle spat in disgust. "More wasted time. A dead skeleton of a city, that's all."

"But it was from here that the firing came," Tance murmured. "Don't forget that."

"And by someone with a good eye and a great deal of experience," Nasha added. "Let's go."

They walked into the city between the ruined buildings. No one spoke. They walked in silence, listening to the echo of their footsteps.

"It's macabre," Dorle muttered. "I've seen ruined cities before but they died of old age, old age and fatigue. This was killed, seared to death. This city didn't die—it was murdered."

"I wonder what the city was called," Nasha said. She turned aside, going up the remains of a stairway from one of the foundations. "Do you think we might find a signpost? Some kind of plaque?"

She peered into the ruins.

"There's nothing there," Dorle said impatiently. "Come on."

"Wait." Nasha bent down, touching a concrete stone. "There's something inscribed on this."

"What is it?" Tance hurried up. He squatted in the dust, running his gloved fingers over the surface of the stone. "Letters, all right." He took a writing stick from the pocket of his pressure suit and copied the inscription on a bit of paper. Dorle glanced over his shoulder. The inscription was:

FRANKLIN APARTMENTS

"That's this city," Nasha said softly. "That was its name."

Tance put the paper in his pocket and they went on. After a time Dorle said, "Nasha, you know, I think we're being watched. But don't look around."

The woman stiffened. "Oh? Why do you say that? Did you see something?"

"No. I can feel it, though. Don't you?"

Nasha smiled a little. "I feel nothing,

but perhaps I'm more used to being stared at." She turned her head slightly. "Oh!"

Dorle reached for his hand weapon. "What is it? What do you see?" Tance had stopped dead in his tracks, his mouth half open.

"The gun," Nasha said. "It's the gun."

"Look at the size of it. The size of the thing." Dorle unfastened his hand weapon slowly. "That's it, all right."

The gun was huge. Stark and immense it pointed up at the sky, a mass of steel and glass, set in a huge slab of concrete. Even as they watched the gun moved on its swivel base, whirring underneath. A slim vane turned with the wind, a network of rods atop a high pole.

"It's alive," Nasha whispered. "It's listening to us, watching us."

The gun moved again, this time clockwise. It was mounted so that it could make a full circle. The barrel lowered a trifle, then resumed its original position.

"But who fires it?" Tance said.

Dorle laughed. "No one. No one fires it."

They stared at him. "What do you mean?"

"It fires itself."

They couldn't believe him. Nasha came close to him, frowning, looking up at him. "I don't understand. What do you mean, it fires itself?"

"Watch, I'll show you. Don't move." Dorle picked up a rock from the ground. He hesitated a moment and then tossed the rock high in the air. The rock passed in front of the gun. Instantly the great barrel moved, the vanes contracted.

The rock fell to the ground. The gun paused, then resumed its calm swivel, its slow circling.

"You see," Dorle said, "it noticed the rock, as soon as I threw it up in the air. It's alert to anything that flies or moves above the ground level. Probably it detected us as soon as we entered the gravitational field of the planet. It probably had a bead on us from the start. We don't have a chance. It knows all about the ship. It's just waiting for us to take off again."

"I understand about the rock," Nasha said, nodding. "The gun noticed it, but not us, since we're on the ground, not above. It's only designed to combat objects in the sky. The ship is safe until it takes off again, then the end will come."

"But what's this gun for?" Tance put in. "There's no one alive here. Everyone is dead."

"It's a machine," Dorle said. "A machine that was made to do a job. And it's doing the job. How it survived the blast I don't know. On it goes, waiting for the enemy. Probably they came by air in some sort of projectiles."

"The enemy," Nasha said. "Their own race. It is hard to believe that they really bombed themselves, fired at themselves."

"Well, it's over with. Except right here, where we're standing. This one gun, still alert, ready to kill. It'll go on until it wears out."

"And by that time we'll be dead," Nasha said bitterly.

"There must have been hundreds of guns like this," Dorle murmured. "They must have been used to the sight, guns, weapons, uniforms. Probably they accepted it as a natural thing, part of their lives, like eating and sleeping. An institution, like the church and the state. Men trained to fight, to lead armies, a regular profession. Honored, respected."

Tance was walking slowly toward the gun, peering nearsightedly up at it. "Quite complex, isn't it? All those vanes and tubes. I suppose this is some sort of a telescopic sight." His gloved hand touched the end of a long tube.

Instantly the gun shifted, the barrel retracting. It swung—

"Don't move!" Dorle cried. The barrel swung past them as they stood, rigid and still. For one terrible moment it hesitated over their heads, clicking and whirring, settling into position. Then the sounds died out and the gun became silent.

Tance smiled foolishly inside his helmet. "I must have put my finger over the lens. I'll be more careful." He made his way up onto the circular slab, stepping gingerly behind the body of the gun. He disappeared from view.

"Where did he go?" Nasha said irritably. "He'll get us all killed."

"Tance, come back!" Dorle shouted. "What's the matter with you?"

"In a minute." There was a long silence. At last the archeologist appeared. "I think I've found something. Come up and I'll show you."

"What is it?"

"Dorle, you said the gun was here to keep the enemy off. I think I know why they wanted to keep the enemy off."

They were puzzled.

"I think I've found what the gun is supposed to guard. Come and give me a hand."

"All right," Dorle said abruptly. "Let's go." He seized Nasha's hand. "Come on. Let's see what he's found. I thought something like this might happen when I saw that the gun was—"

"Like what?" Nasha pulled her hand away. "What are you talking about? You act as if you knew what he's found."

"I do." Dorle smiled down at her. "Do you remember the legend that all races have, the myth of the buried treasure, and the dragon, the serpent that watches it, guards it, keeping everyone away?"

She nodded. "Well?"

Dorle pointed up at the gun.

"That," he said, "is the dragon. Come on."

Between the three of them they managed to pull up the steel cover and lay it to one side. Dorle was wet with perspiration when they finished.

"It isn't worth it," he grunted. He stared into the dark yawning hole. "Or is it?"

Nasha clicked on her hand lamp, shining the beam down the stairs. The steps were thick with dust and rubble. At the bottom was a steel door.

"Come on," Tance said excitedly. He started down the stairs. They

watched him reach the door and pull hopefully on it without success. "Give a hand!"

"All right." They came gingerly after him. Dorle examined the door. It was bolted shut, locked. There was an inscription on the door but he could not read it.

"Now what?" Nasha said.

Dorle took out his hand weapon. "Stand back. I can't think of any other way." He pressed the switch. The bottom of the door glowed red. Presently it began to crumble. Dorle clicked the weapon off. "I think we can get through. Let's try."

The door came apart easily. In a few minutes they had carried it away in pieces and stacked the pieces on the first step. Then they went on, flashing the light ahead of them.

They were in a vault. Dust lay everywhere, on everything, inches thick. Wood crates lined the walls, huge boxes and crates, packages and containers. Tance looked around curiously, his eyes bright.

"What exactly are all these?" he murmured. "Something valuable, I would think." He picked up a round drum and opened it. A spool fell to the floor, unwinding a black ribbon. He examined it, holding it up to the light.

"Look at this!"

They came around him. "Pictures," Nasha said. "Tiny pictures."

"Records of some kind." Tance closed the spool up in the drum again. "Look, hundreds of drums." He flashed the light around. "And those crates. Let's open one."

Dorle was already prying at the wood. The wood had turned brittle and dry. He managed to pull a section away.

It was a picture. A boy in a blue garment, smiling pleasantly, staring ahead, young and handsome. He seemed almost alive, ready to move toward them in the light of the hand lamp. It was one of them, one of the ruined race, the race that had perished.

For a long time they stared at the picture. At last Dorle replaced the board.

"All these other crates," Nasha said. "More pictures. And these drums. What are in the boxes?"

"This is their treasure," Tance said, almost to himself. "Here are their pictures, their records. Probably all their literature is here, their stories, their myths, their ideas about the universe."

"And their history," Nasha said. "We'll be able to trace their development and find out what it was that made them become what they were."

Dorle was wandering around the vault. "Odd," he murmured. "Even at the end, even after they had begun to fight they still knew, someplace down inside them, that their real treasure was this, their books and pictures, their myths. Even after their big cities and buildings and industries were destroyed they probably hoped to come back and find this. After everything else was gone."

"When we get back home we can agitate for a mission to come here," Tance said. "All this can be loaded up

and taken back. We'll be leaving about—"

He stopped.

"Yes," Dorle said dryly. "We'll be leaving about three day-periods from now. We'll fix the ship, then take off. Soon we'll be home, that is, if nothing happens. Like being shot down by that—"

"Oh, stop it!" Nasha said impatiently. "Leave him alone. He's right: all this must be taken back home, sooner or later. We'll have to solve the problem of the gun. We have no choice."

Dorle nodded. "What's your solution, then? As soon as we leave the ground we'll be shot down." His face twisted bitterly. "They've guarded their treasure too well. Instead of being preserved it will lie here until it rots. It serves them right."

"How?"

"Don't you see? This was the only way they knew, building a gun and setting it up to shoot anything that came along. They were so certain that everything was hostile, the enemy, coming to take their possessions away from them. Well, they can keep them."

Nasha was deep in thought, her mind far away. Suddenly she gasped. "Dorle," she said. "What's the matter with us? We have no problem. The gun is no menace at all."

The two men stared at her.

"No menace?" Dorle said. "It's already shot us down once. And as soon as we take off again—"

"Don't you see?" Nasha began to laugh. "The poor foolish gun, it's completely harmless. Even I could deal with it alone."

"You?"

Her eyes were flashing. "With a crowbar. With a hammer or a stick of wood. Let's go back to the ship and load up. Of course we're at its mercy in the air: that's the way it was made. It can fire into the sky, shoot down anything that flies. But that's all! Against something on the ground it has no defenses. Isn't that right?"

Dorle nodded slowly. "The soft underbelly of the dragon. In the legend, the dragon's armor doesn't cover its stomach." He began to laugh. "That's right. That's perfectly right."

"Let's go, then," Nasha said. "Let's get back to the ship. We have work to do here."

It was early the next morning when they reached the ship. During the night the Captain had died, and the crew had ignited his body, according to custom. They had stood solemnly around it until the last ember died. As they were going back to their work the woman and the two men appeared, dirty and tired, still excited.

And presently, from the ship, a line of people came, each carrying something in his hands. The line marched across the gray slag, the eternal expanse of fused metal. When they reached the weapon they all fell on the gun at once, with crowbars, hammers, anything that was heavy and hard.

The telescopic sights shattered into bits. The wiring was pulled out, torn to shreds. The delicate gears were

smashed, dented.

Finally the warheads themselves were carried off and the firing pins removed.

The gun was smashed, the great weapon destroyed. The people went down into the vault and examined the treasure. With its metal-armored guardian dead there was no danger any longer. They studied the pictures, the films, the crates of books, the jeweled crowns, the cups, the statues.

At last, as the sun was dipping into the gray mists that drifted across the planet they came back up the stairs again. For a moment they stood around the wrecked gun looking at the unmoving outline of it.

Then they started back to the ship. There was still much work to be done. The ship had been badly hurt, much had been damaged and lost. The important thing was to repair it as quickly as possible, to get it into the air.

With all of them working together it took just five more days to make it spaceworthy.

Nasha stood in the control room, watching the planet fall away behind them. She folded her arms, sitting down on the edge of the table.

"What are you thinking?" Dorle said.

"I? Nothing."

"Are you sure?"

"I was thinking that there must have been a time when this planet was quite different, when there was life on it."

"I suppose there was. It's unfortunate that no ships from our system came this far, but then we had no reason to suspect intelligent life until we saw the fission glow in the sky."

"And then it was too late."

"Not quite too late. After all, their possessions, their music, books, their pictures, all of that will survive. We'll take them home and study them, and they'll change us. We won't be the same afterwards. Their sculpturing, especially. Did you see the one of the great winged creature, without a head or arms? Broken off, I suppose. But those wings— It looked very old. It will change us a great deal."

"When we come back we won't find the gun waiting for us," Nasha said. "Next time it won't be there to shoot us down. We can land and take the treasure, as you call it." She smiled up at Dorle. "You'll lead us back there, as a good captain should."

"Captain?" Dorle grinned. "Then you've decided."

Nasha shrugged. "Fomar argues with me too much. I think, all in all, I really prefer you."

"Then let's go," Dorle said. "Let's go back home."

The ship roared up, flying over the ruins of the city. It turned in a huge arc and then shot off beyond the horizon, heading into outer space.

Down below, in the center of the ruined city, a single half-broken detector vane moved slightly, catching the roar of the ship. The base of the great gun throbbed painfully, straining to turn. After a moment a red warning light flashed on down inside its destroyed

works.

And a long way off, a hundred miles from the city, another warning light flashed on, far underground. Automatic relays flew into action. Gears turned, belts whined. On the ground above a section of metal slag slipped back. A ramp appeared.

A moment later a small cart rushed to the surface.

The cart turned toward the city. A second cart appeared behind it. It was loaded with wiring cables. Behind it a third cart came, loaded with telescopic tube sights. And behind came more carts, some with relays, some with firing controls, some with tools and parts, screws and bolts, pins and nuts. The final one contained atomic warheads.

The carts lined up behind the first one, the lead cart. The lead cart started off, across the frozen ground, bumping calmly along, followed by the others. Moving toward the city.

To the damaged gun.

THE KEEPER

Evil men had stolen his treasure, and Raud set out with his deer rifle and his great dog Brave to catch the thieves before they could reach the Starfolk. That the men had negatron pistols meant little—Raud was the Keeper....

When he heard the deer crashing through brush and scuffling the dead leaves, he stopped and stood motionless in the path. He watched them bolt down the slope from the right and cross in front of him, wishing he had the rifle, and when the last white tail vanished in the gray-brown woods he drove the spike of the ice-staff into the stiffening ground and took both hands to shift the weight of the pack. If he'd had the rifle, he could have shot only one of them. As it was, they were unfrightened, and he knew where to find them in the morning.

Ahead, to the west and north, low clouds massed; the white front of the Ice-Father loomed clear and sharp between them and the blue of the distant forests. It would snow, tonight. If it stopped at daybreak, he would have good tracking, and in any case, it would be easier to get the carcasses home over snow. He wrenched loose the ice-staff and started forward again, following the path that wound between and among and over the irregular mounds and hillocks. It was still an hour's walk to Keeper's House, and the daylight was fading rapidly.

Sometimes, when he was not so weary and in so much haste, he would loiter here, wondering about the ancient buildings and the long-vanished people who had raised them. There had been no woods at all, then; nothing but great houses like mountains, piling up toward the sky, and the valley where he meant to hunt tomorrow had been an arm of the sea that was now a three days' foot-journey away. Some said that the cities had

been destroyed and the people killed in wars—big wars, not squabbles like the fights between sealing-companies from different villages. He didn't think so, himself. It was more likely that they had all left their homes and gone away in starships when the Ice-Father had been born and started pushing down out of the north. There had been many starships, then. When he had been a boy, the old men had talked about a long-ago time when there had been hundreds of them visible in the sky, every morning and evening. But that had been long ago indeed. Starships came but seldom to this world, now. This world was old and lonely and poor. Like poor lonely old Raud the Keeper.

He felt angry to find himself thinking like that. Never pity yourself, Raud; be proud. That was what his father had always taught him: "Be proud, for you are the Keeper's son, and when I am gone, you will be the Keeper after me. But in your pride, be humble, for what you will keep is the Crown."

The thought of the Crown, never entirely absent from his mind, wakened the anxiety that always slept lightly if at all. He had been away all day, and there were so many things that could happen. The path seemed longer, after that; the landmarks farther apart. Finally, he came out on the edge of the steep bank, and looked down across the brook to the familiar low windowless walls and sharp-ridged roof of Keeper's House; and when he came, at last, to the door, and pulled the latchstring, he heard the dogs inside—the soft, coughing bark of Brave, and the anxious little whimper of Bold—and he knew that there was nothing wrong in Keeper's House.

The room inside was lighted by a fist-sized chunk of lumicon, hung in a net bag of thongs from the rafter over the table. It was old—cast off by some rich Southron as past its best brilliance, it had been old when he had bought it from Yorn Nazvik the Trader, and that had been years ago. Now its light was as dim and yellow as firelight. He'd have to replace it soon, but this trip he had needed new cartridges for the big rifle. A man could live in darkness more easily than he could live without cartridges.

The big black dogs were rising from their bed of deerskins on the stone slab that covered the crypt in the far corner. They did not come to meet him, but stayed in their place of trust, greeting him with anxious, eager little sounds.

"Good boys," he said. "Good dog, Brave; good dog, Bold. Old Keeper's home again. Hungry?"

They recognized that word, and whined. He hung up the ice-staff on the pegs by the door, then squatted and got his arms out of the pack-straps.

"Just a little now; wait a little," he told the dogs. "Keeper'll get something for you."

He unhooked the net bag that held the lumicon and went to the ladder, climbing to the loft between the stone ceiling and the steep snow-shed roof; he cut down two big chunks of smoked wild-ox beef—the dogs liked that better than smoked venison—and climbed down.

He tossed one chunk up against the

ceiling, at the same time shouting: "Bold! Catch!" Bold leaped forward, sinking his teeth into the meat as it was still falling, shaking and mauling it. Brave, still on the crypt-slab, was quivering with hunger and eagerness, but he remained in place until the second chunk was tossed and he was ordered to take it. Then he, too, leaped and caught it, savaging it in mimicry of a kill. For a while, he stood watching them growl and snarl and tear their meat, great beasts whose shoulders came above his own waist. While they lived to guard it, the Crown was safe. Then he crossed to the hearth, scraped away the covering ashes, piled on kindling and logs and fanned the fire alight. He lifted the pack to the table and unlaced the deerskin cover.

Cartridges in plastic boxes of twenty, long and thick; shot for the duck-gun, and powder and lead and cartridge-primers; fills for the fire-lighter; salt; needles; a new file. And the deerskin bag of trade-tokens. He emptied them on the table and counted them—tokens, and half-tokens and five-tokens, and even one ten-token. There were always less in the bag, after each trip to the village. The Southrons paid less and less, each year, for furs and skins, and asked more and more for what they had to sell.

He put away the things he had brought from the village, and was considering whether to open the crypt now and replace the bag of tokens, when the dogs stiffened, looking at the door. They got to their feet, neck-hairs bristling, as the knocking began.

He tossed the token-bag onto the mantel and went to the door, the dogs following and standing ready as he opened it.

The snow had started, and now the ground was white except under the evergreens. Three men stood outside the door, and over their shoulders he could see an airboat grounded in the clearing in front of the house.

"You are honored, Raud Keeper," one of them began. "Here are strangers who have come to talk to you. Strangers from the Stars!"

He recognized the speaker, in sealskin boots and deerskin trousers and hooded overshirt like his own—Vahr Farg's son, one of the village people. His father was dead, and his woman was the daughter of Gorth Sledmaker, and he was a house-dweller with his woman's father. A worthless youth, lazy and stupid and said to be a coward. Still, guests were guests, even when brought by the likes of Vahr Farg's son. He looked again at the airboat, and remembered seeing it, that day, made fast to the top-deck of Yorn Nazvik's trading-ship, the *Issa*.

"Enter and be welcome; the house is yours, and all in it that is mine to give." He turned to the dogs. "Brave, Bold; go watch."

Obediently, they trotted over to the crypt and lay down. He stood aside; Vahr entered, standing aside also, as though he were the host, inviting his companions in. They wore heavy garments of woven cloth and boots of tanned leather with hard heels and stiff soles, and as they came in, each un-

buckled and laid aside a belt with a holstered negatron pistol. One was stocky and broad-shouldered, with red hair; the other was slender, dark haired and dark eyed, with a face as smooth as a woman's. Everybody in the village had wondered about them. They were not of Yorn Nazvik's crew, but passengers on the *Issa*.

"These are Empire people, from the Far Stars," Vahr informed him, naming their names. Long names, which meant nothing; certainly they were not names the Southrons from the Warm Seas bore. "And this is Raud the Keeper, with whom your honors wish to speak."

"Keeper's House is honored. I'm sorry that I have not food prepared; if you can excuse me while I make some ready...."

"You think these noblemen from the Stars would eat your swill?" Vahr hooted. "Crazy old fool, these are—"

The slim man pivoted on his heel; his open hand caught Vahr just below the ear and knocked him sprawling. It must have been some kind of trick-blow. That or else the slim stranger was stronger than he looked.

"Hold your miserable tongue!" he told Vahr, who was getting to his feet. "We're guests of Raud the Keeper, and we'll not have him insulted in his own house by a cur like you!"

The man with red hair turned. "I am ashamed. We should not have brought this into your house; we should have left it outside." He spoke the Northland language well, "It will honor us to share your food, Keeper."

"Yes, and see here," the younger man said, "we didn't know you'd be alone. Let us help you. Dranigo's a fine cook, and I'm not bad, myself."

He started to protest, then let them have their way. After all, a guest's women helped the woman of the house, and as there was no woman in Keeper's House, it was not unfitting for them to help him.

"Your friend's name is Dranigo?" he asked. "I'm sorry, but I didn't catch yours."

"I don't wonder; fool mouthed it so badly I couldn't understand it myself. It's Salvadro."

They fell to work with him, laying out eating-tools—there were just enough to go around—and hunting for dishes, of which there were not. Salvadro saved that situation by going out and bringing some in from the airboat. He must have realized that the lumicon over the table was the only light beside the fire in the house, for he was carrying a globe of the luminous plastic with him when he came in, grumbling about how dark it had gotten outside. It was new and brilliant, and the light hurt Raud's eyes, at first.

"Are you truly from the Stars?" he asked, after the food was on the table and they had begun to eat. "Neither I nor any in the village have seen anybody from the Stars before."

The big man with the red hair nodded. "Yes. We are from Dremna."

Why, Dremna was the Great World, at the middle of everything! Dremna was the Empire. People from Dremna

came to the cities of Awster and fabulous Antark as Southron traders from the Warm Seas came to the villages of the Northfolk. He stammered something about that.

"Yes. You see, we...." Dranigo began. "I don't know the word for it, in your language, but we're people whose work it is to learn things. Not from other people or from books, but new things, that nobody else knows. We came here to learn about the long-ago times on this world, like the great city that was here and is now mounds of stone and earth. Then, when we go back to Dremna, we will tell other people what we have found out."

Vahr Farg's son, having eaten his fill, was fidgeting on his stool, looking contemptuously at the strangers and their host. He thought they were fools to waste time learning about people who had died long ago. So he thought the Keeper was a fool, to guard a worthless old piece of junk.

Raud hesitated for a moment, then said: "I have a very ancient thing, here in this house. It was worn, long ago, by great kings. Their names, and the name of their people, are lost, but the Crown remains. It was left to me as a trust by my father, who was Keeper before me and to whom it was left by his father, who was Keeper in his time. Have you heard of it?"

Dranigo nodded. "We heard of it, first of all, on Dremna," he said. "The Empire has a Space Navy base, and observatories and relay stations, on this planet. Space Navy officers who had been here brought the story back; they heard it from traders from the Warm Seas, who must have gotten it from people like Yorn Nazvik. Would you show it to us, Keeper? It was to see the Crown that we came here."

Raud got to his feet, and saw, as he unhooked the lumicon, that he was trembling. "Yes, of course. It is an honor. It is an ancient and wonderful thing, but I never thought that it was known on Dremna." He hastened across to the crypt.

The dogs looked up as he approached. They knew that he wanted to lift the cover, but they were comfortable and had to be coaxed to leave it. He laid aside the deerskins. The stone slab was heavy, and he had to strain to tilt it up. He leaned it against the wall, then picked up the lumicon and went down the steps into the little room below, opening the wooden chest and getting out the bundle wrapped in bearskin. He brought it up again and carried it to the table, from which Dranigo and Salvadro were clearing the dishes.

"Here it is," he said, untying the thongs. "I do not know how old it is. It was old even before the Ice-Father was born."

That was too much for Vahr. "See, I told you he's crazy!" he cried. "The Ice-Father has been here forever. Gorth Sledmaker says so," he added, as though that settled it.

"Gorth Sledmaker's a fool. He thinks the world began in the time of his grandfather." He had the thongs untied, and spread the bearskin, revealing the

blackened leather box, flat on the bottom and domed at the top. "How long ago do you think it was that the Ice-Father was born?" he asked Salvadro and Dranigo.

"Not more than two thousand years," Dranigo said. "The glaciation hadn't started in the time of the Third Empire. There is no record of this planet during the Fourth, but by the beginning of the Fifth Empire, less than a thousand years ago, things here were very much as they are now."

"There are other worlds which have Ice-Fathers," Salvadro explained. "They are all worlds having one pole or the other in open water, surrounded by land. When the polar sea is warmed by water from the tropics, snow falls on the lands around, and more falls in winter than melts in summer, and so is an Ice-Father formed. Then, when the polar sea is all frozen, no more snow falls, and the Ice-Father melts faster than it grows, and finally vanishes. And then, when warm water comes into the polar sea again, more snow falls, and it starts over again. On a world like this, it takes fifteen or twenty thousand years from one Ice-Father to the next."

"I never heard that there had been another Ice-Father, before this one. But then, I only know the stories told by the old men, when I was a boy. I suppose that was before the first people came in starships to this world."

The two men of Dremna looked at one another oddly, and he wondered, as he unfastened the brass catches on the box, if he had said something foolish, and then he had the box open, and lifted out the Crown. He was glad, now, that Salvadro had brought in the new lumicon, as he put the box aside and set the Crown on the black bearskin. The golden circlet and the four arches of gold above it were clean and bright, and the jewels were splendid in the light. Salvadro and Dranigo were looking at it wide-eyed. Vahr Farg's son was open-mouthed.

"Great Universe! Will you look at that diamond on the top!" Salvadro was saying.

"That's not the work of any Galactic art-period," Dranigo declared. "That thing goes back to the Pre-Interstellar Era." And for a while he talked excitedly to Salvadro.

"Tell me, Keeper," Salvadro said at length, "how much do you know about the Crown? Where did it come from; who made it; who were the first Keepers?"

He shook his head. "I only know what my father told me, when I was a boy. Now I am an old man, and some things I have forgotten. But my father was Runch, Raud's son, who was the son of Yorn, the son of Raud, the son of Runch." He went back six more generations, then faltered and stopped. "Beyond that, the names have been lost. But I do know that for a long time the Crown was in a city to the north of here, and before that it was brought across the sea from another country, and the name of that country was Brinn."

Dranigo frowned, as though he had never heard the name before. "Brinn."

Salvadro's eyes widened. "Brinn, Dranigo! Do you think that might be Britain?"

Dranigo straightened, staring, "It might be! Britain was a great nation, once; the last nation to join the Terran Federation, in the Third Century Pre-Interstellar. And they had a king, and a crown with a great diamond...."

"The story of where it was made," Rand offered, "or who made it, has been lost. I suppose the first people brought it to this world when they came in starships."

"It's more wonderful than that, Keeper," Salvadro said. "It was made on this world, before the first starship was built. This world is Terra, the Mother-World; didn't you know that, Keeper? This is the world where Man was born."

He hadn't known that. Of course, there had to be a world like that, but a great world in the middle of everything, like Dremna. Not this old, forgotten world.

"It's true, Keeper," Dranigo told him. He hesitated slightly, then cleared his throat. "Keeper, you're young no longer, and some day you must die, as your father and his father did. Who will care for the Crown then?"

Who, indeed? His woman had died long ago, and she had given him no sons, and the daughters she had given him had gone their own ways with men of their own choosing and he didn't know what had become of any of them. And the village people—they would start picking the Crown apart to sell the jewels, one by one, before the ashes of his pyre stopped smoking.

"Let us have it, Keeper," Salvadro said. "We will take it to Dremna, where armed men will guard it day and night, and it will be a trust upon the Government of the Empire forever."

He recoiled in horror. "Man! You don't know what you're saying!" he cried. "This is the Crown, and I am the Keeper; I cannot part with it as long as there is life in me."

"And when there is not, what? Will it be laid on your pyre, so that it may end with you?" Dranigo asked.

"Do you think we'd throw it away as soon as we got tired looking at it?" Salvadro exclaimed. "To show you how we'll value this, we'll give you ... how much is a thousand imperials in trade-tokens, Dranigo?"

"I'd guess about twenty thousand."

"We'll give you twenty thousand Government trade-tokens," Salvadro said. "If it costs us that much, you'll believe that we'll take care of it, won't you?"

Raud rose stiffly. "It is a wrong thing," he said, "to enter a man's house and eat at his table, and then insult him."

Dranigo rose also, and Salvadro with him. "We had no mind to insult you, Keeper, or offer you a bribe to betray your trust. We only offer to help you fulfill it, so that the Crown will be safe after all of us are dead. Well, we won't talk any more about it, now. We're going in Yorn Nazvik's ship, tomorrow; he's trading in the country to the west, but before he returns to the Warm Seas, he'll stop at Long Valley Town, and we'll fly

over to see you. In the meantime, think about this; ask yourself if you would not be doing a better thing for the Crown by selling it to us."

They wanted to leave the dishes and the new lumicon, and he permitted it, to show that he was not offended by their offer to buy the Crown. He knew that it was something very important to them, and he admitted, grudgingly, that they could care for it better than he. At least, they would not keep it in a hole under a hut in the wilderness, guarded only by dogs. But they were not Keepers, and he was. To them, the Crown would be but one of many important things; to him it was everything. He could not imagine life without it.

He lay for a long time among his bed-robes, unable to sleep, thinking of the Crown and the visitors. Finally, to escape those thoughts, he began planning tomorrow morning's hunt.

He would start out as soon as the snow stopped, and go down among the scrub-pines; he would take Brave with him, and leave Bold on guard at home. Brave was more obedient, and a better hunter. Bold would jump for the deer that had been shot, but Brave always tried to catch or turn the ones that were still running.

He needed meat badly, and he needed more deerskins, to make new clothes. He was thinking of the new overshirt he meant to make as he fell asleep....

It was past noon when he and Brave turned back toward Keeper's House. The deer had gone farther than he had expected, but he had found them, and killed four. The carcasses were cleaned and hung from trees, out of reach of the foxes and the wolves, and he would take Brave back to the house and leave him on guard, and return with Bold and the sled to bring in the meat. He was thinking cheerfully of the fresh meat when he came out onto the path from the village, a mile from Keeper's House. Then he stopped short, looking at the tracks.

Three men—no, four—had come from the direction of the village since the snow had stopped. One had been wearing sealskin boots, of the sort worn by all Northfolk. The others had worn Southron boots, with ribbed plastic soles. That puzzled him. None of the village people wore Southron boots, and as he had been leaving in the early morning, he had seen Yorn Nazvik's ship, the *Issa*, lift out from the village and pass overhead, vanishing in the west. Possibly these were deserters. In any case, they were not good people. He slipped the heavy rifle from its snow-cover, checked the chamber, and hung the empty cover around his neck like a scarf. He didn't like the looks of it.

He liked it even less when he saw that the man in sealskin boots had stopped to examine the tracks he and Brave had made on leaving, and had then circled the house and come back, to be joined by his plastic-soled companions. Then they had all put down their packs and their ice-staffs, and advanced toward the door of the house. They had stopped there for a moment, and then they had entered, come out again, gotten their packs and ice-staffs,

and gone away, up the slope to the north.

"Wait, Brave," he said. "Watch."

Then he advanced, careful not to step on any of the tracks until he reached the doorstep, where it could not be avoided.

"Bold!" he called loudly. "Bold!"

Silence. No welcoming whimper, no padding of feet, inside. He pulled the latchstring with his left hand and pushed the door open with his foot, the rifle ready. There was no need for that. What welcomed him, within, was a sickening stench of burned flesh and hair.

The new lumicon lighted the room brilliantly; his first glance was enough. The slab that had covered the crypt was thrown aside, along with the pile of deerskins, and between it and the door was a shapeless black heap that, in a dimmer light, would not have been instantly recognizable as the body of Bold. Fighting down an impulse to rush in, he stood in the door, looking about and reading the story of what had happened. The four men had entered, knowing that they would find Bold alone. The one in the lead had had a negatron pistol drawn, and when Bold had leaped at them, he had been blasted. The blast had caught the dog from in front—the chest-cavity was literally exploded, and the neck and head burned and smashed unrecognizably. Even the brass studs on the leather collar had been melted.

That and the ribbed sole-prints outside meant the same thing—Southrons. Every Southron who came into the Northland, even the common crewmen on the trading ships, carried some kind of an energy-weapon. They were good only for fighting—one look at the body of Bold showed what they did to meat and skins.

He entered, then, laying his rifle on the table, and got down the lumicon and went over to the crypt. After a while, he returned, hung up the light again, and dropped onto a stool. He sat staring at the violated crypt and tugging with one hand at a corner of his beard, trying desperately to think.

The thieves had known exactly where the Crown was kept and how it was guarded; after killing Bold, they had gone straight to it, taken it and gone away—three men in plastic-soled Southron boots and one man in soft boots of sealskins, each with a pack and an ice-staff, and two of them with rifles.

Vahr Farg's son, and three deserters from the crew of Yorn Nazvik's ship.

It hadn't been Dranigo and Salvadro. They could have left the ship in their airboat and come back, flying low, while he had been hunting. But they would have grounded near the house, they would not have carried packs, and they would have brought nobody with them.

He thought he knew what had happened. Vahr Farg's son had seen the Crown, and he had heard the two Starfolk offer more trade-tokens for it than everything in the village was worth. But he was a coward; he would never dare to face the Keeper's rifle and the teeth of Brave and Bold alone. So, since

none of the village folk would have part in so shameful a crime against the moral code of the Northland, he had talked three of Yorn Nazvik's airmen into deserting and joining him.

And he had heard Dranigo say that the *Issa* would return to Long Valley Town after the trading voyage to the west. Long Valley was on the other side of this tongue of the Ice-Father; it was a good fifteen days' foot-journey around, but by climbing and crossing, they could easily be there in time to meet Yorn Nazvik's ship and the two Starfolk. Well, where Vahr Farg's son could take three Southrons, Raud the Keeper could follow.

Their tracks led up the slope beside the brook, always bearing to the left, in the direction of the Ice-Father. After an hour, he found where they had stopped and unslung their packs, and rested long enough to smoke a cigarette. He read the story they had left in the snow, and then continued, Brave trotting behind him pulling the sled. A few snowflakes began dancing in the air, and he quickened his steps. He knew, generally, where the thieves were going, but he wanted their tracks unobliterated in front of him. The snow fell thicker and thicker, and it was growing dark, and he was tiring. Even Brave was stumbling occasionally before Raud stopped, in a hollow among the pines, to build his tiny fire and eat and feed the dog. They bedded down together, covered by the same sleeping robes.

When he woke, the world was still black and white and gray in the early dawn-light, and the robe that covered him and Brave was powdered with snow, and the pine-branches above him were loaded and sagging.

The snow had completely obliterated the tracks of the four thieves, and it was still falling. When the sled was packed and the dog harnessed to it, they set out, keeping close to the flank of the Ice-Father on their left.

It stopped snowing toward mid-day, and a little after, he heard a shot, far ahead, and then two more, one upon the other. The first shot would be the rifle of Vahr Farg's son; it was a single-loader, like his own. The other two were from one of the light Southron rifles, which fired a dozen shots one after another. They had shot, or shot at, something like a deer, he supposed. That was sensible; it would save their dried meat for the trip across the back of the Ice-Father. And it showed that they still didn't know he was following them. He found their tracks, some hours later.

Toward dusk, he came to a steep building-mound. It had fared better than most of the houses of the ancient people; it rose to twenty times a man's height and on the south-east side it was almost perpendicular. The other side sloped, and he was able to climb to the top, and far away, ahead of him, he saw a tiny spark appear and grow. The fire could not be more than two hours ahead.

He built no fire that evening, but shared a slab of pemmican with Brave, and they huddled together under the bearskin robe. The dog fell asleep at once. For a long time, Raud sat awake, thinking.

At first, he considered resting for a while, and then pressing forward and attacking them as they slept. He had to kill all of them to regain the Crown; that he had taken for granted from the first. He knew what would happen if the Government Police came into this. They would take one Southron's word against the word of ten Northfolk, and the thieves would simply claim the Crown as theirs and accuse him of trying to steal it. And Dranigo and Salvadro—they seemed like good men, but they might see this as the only way to get the Crown for themselves.... He would have to settle the affair for himself, before the men reached Long Valley town.

If he could do it here, it would save him and Brave the toil and danger of climbing the Ice-Father. But could he? They had two rifles, one an autoloader, and they had in all likelihood three negatron pistols. After the single shot of the big rifle was fired, he had only a knife and a hatchet and the spiked and pickaxed ice-staff, and Brave. One of the thieves would kill him before he and Brave killed all of them, and then the Crown would be lost. He dropped into sleep, still thinking of what to do.

He climbed the mound of the ancient building again in the morning, and looked long and carefully at the face of the Ice-Father. It would take the thieves the whole day to reach that place where the two tongues of the glacier split apart, the easiest spot to climb. They would not try to climb that evening; Vahr, who knew the most about it, would be the last to advise such a risk. He was sure that by going up at the nearest point he could get to the top of the Ice-Father before dark, and drag Brave up after him. It would be a fearful climb, and he would have most of a day's journey after that to reach the head of the long ravine up which the thieves would come, but when they came up, he could be there waiting for them. He knew what the old rifle could do, to an inch, and there were places where the thieves would be coming up where he could stay out of blaster-range and pick them all off, even with a single-loader.

He knew about negatron pistols, too. They shot little bullets of energy; they were very fast, and did not drop, like a real bullet, so that no judgment of range was needed. But the energy died quickly; the negatrons lived only long enough to go five hundred paces and no more. At eight hundred, he could hit a man easily. He almost felt himself pitying Vahr Farg's son and his companions.

When he reached the tumble of rocks that had been dragged along with and pushed out from the Ice-Father, he stopped and made up a pack—sleeping robes, all his cartridges, as much pemmican as he could carry, and the bag of trade-tokens. If the chase took him to Long Valley Town, he would need money. He also coiled about his waist a long rawhide climbing-rope, and left the sled-harness on Brave, simply detaching the traces.

At first, they walked easily on the sloping ice. Then, as it grew steeper, he fastened the rope to the dog's harness and advanced a little at a time, dragging Brave up after him. Soon he was forced to snub the rope with his ice-staff and

chop steps with his hatchet. Toward noon—at least he thought it was noon—it began snowing again, and the valley below was blotted out in a swirl of white.

They came to a narrow ledge, where they could rest, with a wall of ice rising sheerly above them. He would have to climb that alone, and then pull Brave up with the rope. He started working his way up the perpendicular face, clinging by the pick of his ice-staff, chopping footholds with the hatchet; the pack and the slung rifle on his back pulled at him and threatened to drag him down. At length, he dragged himself over the edge and drove the ice-staff in.

"Up, Brave!" he called, tugging on the rope. "Good dog, Brave; come up!"

Brave tried to jump and slipped back. He tried again, and this time Raud snubbed the rope and held him. Below the dog pawed frantically, until he found a paw-hold on one of the chopped-out steps. Raud hauled on the rope, and made another snub.

It seemed like hours. It probably was; his arms were aching, and he had lost all sense of time, or of the cold, or the danger of the narrow ledge; he forgot about the Crown and the men who had stolen it; he even forgot how he had come here, or that he had ever been anywhere else. All that mattered was to get Brave up on the ledge beside him.

Finally Brave came up and got first his fore-paws and then his body over the edge. He lay still, panting proudly, while Raud hugged him and told him, over and over, that he was a good dog. They rested for a long time, and Raud got a slab of pemmican from the pack and divided it with Brave.

It was while they rested in the snow, munching, that he heard the sound for the first time. It was faint and far away, and it sounded like thunder, or like an avalanche beginning, and that puzzled him, for this was not the time of year for either. As he listened, he heard it again, and this time he recognized it—negatron pistols. It frightened him; he wondered if the thieves had met a band of hunters. No; if they were fighting Northfolk, there would be the reports of firearms, too. Or might they be fighting among themselves? Remembering the melted brass studs on Bold's collar, he became more frightened at the thought of what a negatron-blast could do to the Crown.

The noise stopped, then started again, and he got to his feet, calling to Brave. They were on a wide ledge that slanted upward toward the north. It would take him closer to the top, and closer to where Vahr and his companions would come up. Together, they started up, Raud probing cautiously ahead of him with the ice-staff for hidden crevasses. After a while, he came to a wide gap in the ice beside him, slanting toward the top, its upper end lost in swirling snow. So he and Brave began climbing, and after a while he could no longer hear the negatron pistols.

When it was almost too dark to go farther, he suddenly found himself on level snow, and here he made camp, digging a hole and lining it with the sleeping robes.

The sky was clear when he woke, and a pale yellow light was glowing in the east. For a while he lay huddled with the dog, stiff and miserable, and then he forced himself to his feet. He ate, and fed Brave, and then checked his rifle and made his pack.

He was sure, now, that he had a plan that would succeed. He could reach the place where Vahr and the Southrons would come up long before they did, and be waiting for them. In his imagination, he could see them coming up in single file, Vahr Farg's son in the lead, and he could imagine himself hidden behind a mound of snow, the ice-staff upright to brace his left hand and the forestock of the rifle resting on his outthrust thumb and the butt against his shoulder. The first bullet would be for Vahr. He could shoot all of them, one after another, that way....

He stopped, looking in chagrined incredulity at the tracks in front of him—the tracks he knew so well, of one man in sealskin boots and three men with ribbed plastic soles. Why, it couldn't be! They should be no more than half way up the long ravine, between the two tongues of the Ice-Father, ten miles to the north. But here they were, on the back of the Ice-Father and crossing to the west ahead of him. They must have climbed the sheer wall of ice, only a few miles from where he had dragged himself and Brave to the top. Then he remembered the negatron-blasts he had heard. While he had been chopping footholds with a hatchet, they had been smashing tons of ice out of their way.

"Well, Brave," he said mildly. "Old Keeper wasn't so smart, after all, was he? Come on, Brave."

The thieves were making good time. He read that from the tracks —straight, evenly spaced, no weary heel-dragging. Once or twice, he saw where they had stopped for a brief rest. He hoped to see their fire in the evening.

He didn't. They wouldn't have enough fuel to make a big one, or keep it burning long. But in the morning, as he was breaking camp, he saw black smoke ahead.

A few times, he had been in airboats, and had looked down on the back of the Ice-Father, and it had looked flat. Really, it was not. There were long ridges, sheer on one side and sloping gently on the other, where the ice had overridden hills and low mountains, or had cracked and one side had pushed up over the other. And there were deep gullies where the prevailing winds had scooped away loose snow year after year for centuries, and drifts where it had piled, many of them higher than the building-mounds of the ancient cities. But from a distance, as from above, they all blended into a featureless white monotony.

At last, leaving a tangle of cliffs and ravines, he looked out across a broad stretch of nearly level snow and saw, for the first time, the men he was following. Four tiny dots, so far that they seemed motionless, strung out in single file. Instantly, he crouched behind a swell in the surface and dragged Brave down beside him. One of them, looking back, might see him, as he saw them. When

they vanished behind a snow-hill, he rose and hastened forward, to take cover again. He kept at this all day; by alternately resting and running, be found himself gaining on them, and toward evening, he was within rifle-range. The man in the lead was Vahr Farg's son; even at that distance he recognized him easily. The others were Southrons, of course; they wore quilted garments of cloth, and quilted hoods. The man next to Vahr, in blue, carried a rifle, as Vahr did. The man in yellow had only an ice-staff, and the man in green, at the rear, had the Crown on his pack, still in the bearskin bundle.

He waited, at the end of the day, until he saw the light of their fire. Then he and Brave circled widely around their camp, and stopped behind a snow-ridge, on the other side of an open and level stretch a mile wide. He dug the sleeping-hole on the crest of the ridge, making it larger than usual, and piled up a snow breastwork in front of it, with an embrasure through which he could look or fire without being seen.

Before daybreak, he was awake and had his pack made, and when he saw the smoke of the thieves' campfire, he was lying behind his breastwork, the rifle resting on its folded cover, muzzle toward the smoke. He lay for a long time, watching, before he saw the file of tiny dots emerge into the open.

They came forward steadily, in the same order as on the day before, Vahr in the lead and the man with the Crown in the rear. The thieves suspected nothing; they grew larger and larger as they approached, until they were at the range for which he had set his sights. He cuddled the butt of the rifle against his cheek. As the man who carried the Crown walked under the blade of the front sight, he squeezed the trigger.

The rifle belched pink flame and roared and pounded his shoulder. As the muzzle was still rising, he flipped open the breech, and threw out the empty. He inserted a fresh round.

There were only three of them, now. The man with the bearskin bundle was down and motionless. Vahr Farg's son had gotten his rifle unslung and uncovered. The Southron with the other rifle was slower; he was only getting off the cover as Vahr, who must have seen the flash, fired hastily. Too hastily; the bullet kicked up snow twenty feet to the left. The third man had drawn his negatron pistol and was trying to use it; thin hairlines of brilliance were jetting out from his hand, stopping far short of their mark.

Raud closed his sights on the man with the autoloading rifle; as he did, the man with the negatron pistol, realizing the limitations of his weapon, was sweeping it back and forth, aiming at the snow fifty yards in front of him. Raud couldn't see the effect of his second shot—between him and his target, blueish light blazed and twinkled, and dense clouds of steam rose—but he felt sure that he had missed. He reloaded, and watched for movements on the edge of the rising steam.

It cleared, slowly; when it did, there was nothing behind it. Even the body of the dead man was gone. He blinked,

bewildered. He'd picked that place carefully; there had been no gully or ravine within running distance. Then he grunted. There hadn't been—but there was now. The negatron pistol again. The thieves were hidden in a pit they had blasted, and they had dragged the body in with them.

He crawled back to reassure Brave, who was guarding the pack, and to shift the pack back for some distance. Then he returned to his embrasure in the snow-fort and resumed his watch. For a long time, nothing happened, and then a head came briefly peeping up out of the pit. A head under a green hood. Raud chuckled mirthlessly into his beard. If he'd been doing that, he'd have traded hoods with the dead man before shoving up his body to draw fire. This kept up, at intervals, for about an hour. He was wondering if they would stay in the pit until dark.

Then Vahr Farg's son leaped out of the pit and began running across the snow. He had his pack, and his rifle; he ran, zig-zag, almost directly toward where Raud was lying. Raud laughed, this time in real amusement. The Southrons had chased Vahr out, as a buck will chase his does in front of him when he thinks there is danger in front. If Vahr wasn't shot, it would be safe for them to come out. If he was, it would be no loss, and the price of the Crown would only have to be divided in two, rather than three, shares. Vahr came to within two hundred yards of Raud's unseen rifle, and then dropped his pack and flung himself down behind it, covering the ridge with his rifle.

Minutes passed, and then the Southron in yellow came out and ran forward. He had the bearskin bundle on his pack; he ran to where Vahr lay, added his pack to Vahr's, and lay down behind it. Raud chewed his underlip in vexation. This wasn't the way he wanted it; that fellow had a negatron pistol, and he was close enough to use it effectively. And he was sheltered behind the Crown; Raud was afraid to shoot. He didn't miss what he shot at—often. But no man alive could say that he never missed.

The other Southron, the one in blue with the autoloading rifle, came out and advanced slowly, his weapon at the ready. Raud tensed himself to jump, aimed carefully, and waited. When the man in blue was a hundred yards from the pit, he shot him dead. The rifle was still lifting from the recoil when he sprang to his feet, turned, and ran. Before he was twenty feet away, the place where he had been exploded; the force of the blast almost knocked him down, and steam blew past and ahead of him. Ignoring his pack and ice-staff, he ran on, calling to Brave to follow. The dog obeyed instantly; more negatron-blasts were thundering and blazing and steaming on the crest of the ridge. He swerved left, ran up another slope, and slid down the declivity beyond into the ravine on the other side.

There he paused to eject the empty, make sure that there was no snow in the rifle bore, and reload. The blasting had stopped by then; after a moment, he heard the voice of Vahr Farg's son, and guessed that the two surviving thieves

had advanced to the blasted crest of the other ridge. They'd find the pack, and his tracks and Brave's. He wondered whether they'd come hunting for him, or turn around and go the other way. He knew what he'd do, under the circumstances, but he doubted if Vahr's mind would work that way. The Southron's might; he wouldn't want to be caught between blaster-range and rifle-range of Raud the Keeper again.

"Come, Brave," he whispered, looking quickly around and then starting to run.

Lay a trail down this ravine for them to follow. Then get to the top of the ridge beside it, double back, and wait for them. Let them pass, and shoot the Southron first. By now, Vahr would have a negatron pistol too, taken from the body of the man in blue, but it wasn't a weapon he was accustomed to, and he'd be more than a little afraid of it.

The ravine ended against an upthrust face of ice, at right angles to the ridge he had just crossed; there was a V-shaped notch between them. He turned into this; it would be a good place to get to the top....

He found himself face to face, at fifteen feet, with Vahr Farg's son and the Southron in yellow, coming through from the other side. They had their packs, the Southron had the bearskin bundle, and they had drawn negatron pistols in their hands.

Swinging up the rifle, he shot the Southron in the chest, making sure he hit him low enough to miss the Crown. At the same time, he shouted:

"*Catch, Brave!*"

Brave never jumped for the deer or wild-ox that had been shot; always for the one still on its feet. He launched himself straight at the throat of Vahr Farg's son—and into the muzzle of Vahr's blaster. He died in a blue-white flash.

Raud had reversed the heavy rifle as Brave leaped; he threw it, butt-on, like a seal-spear, into Vahr's face. As soon as it was out of his fingers, he was jumping forward, snatching out his knife. His left hand found Vahr's right wrist, and he knew that he was driving the knife into Vahr's body, over and over, trying to keep the blaster pointed away from him and away from the body of the dead Southron. At last, the negatron-pistol fell from Vahr's fingers, and the arm that had been trying to fend off his knife relaxed.

He straightened and tried to stand—he had been kneeling on Vahr's body, he found—and reeled giddily. He got to his feet and stumbled to the other body, kneeling beside it. He tried for a long time before he was able to detach the bearskin bundle from the dead man's pack. Then he got the pack open, and found dried venison. He started to divide it, and realized that there was no Brave with whom to share it. He had just sent Brave to his death.

Well, and so? Brave had been the Keeper's dog. He had died for the Crown, and that had been his duty. If he could have saved the Crown by giving his own life, Raud would have died too. But he could not—if Raud died the Crown was lost.

The sky was darkening rapidly, and the snow was whitening the body in green. Moving slowly, he started to make camp for the night.

It was still snowing when he woke. He started to rise, wondering, at first, where Brave was, and then he huddled back among the robes—his own and the dead men's—and tried to go to sleep again. Finally, he got up and ate some of his pemmican, gathered his gear and broke camp. For a moment, and only a moment, he stood looking to the east, in the direction he had come from. Then he turned west and started across the snow toward the edge of the Ice-Father.

The snow stopped before he reached the edge, and the sun was shining when he found a slanting way down into the valley. Then, out of the north, a black dot appeared in the sky and grew larger, until he saw that it was a Government airboat—one of the kind used by the men who measured the growth of the Ice-Father. It came curving in and down toward him, and a window slid open and a man put his head out.

"Want us to lift you down?" he asked. "We're going to Long Valley Town. If that's where you're going, we can take you the whole way."

"Yes. That's where I'm going." He said it as though he were revealing, for the first time, some discovery he had just made. "For your kindness and help, I thank you."

In less time than a man could walk two miles with a pack, they were letting down in front of the Government House in Long Valley Town.

He had never been in the Government House before. The walls were clear glass. The floors were plastic, clean and white. Strips of bright new lumicon ran around every room at the tops of all the walls. There were no fires, but the great rooms were as warm as though it were a midsummer afternoon.

Still carrying his pack and his rifle, Raud went to a desk where a Southron in a white shirt sat.

"Has Yorn Nazvik's ship, the *Issa*, been here lately?" he asked.

"About six days ago," the Southron said, without looking up from the papers on his desk. "She's on a trading voyage to the west now, but Nazvik's coming back here before he goes south. Be here in about ten days." He looked up. "You have business with Nazvik?"

Raud shook his head. "Not with Yorn Nazvik, no. My business is with the two Starfolk who are passengers with him. Dranigo and Salvadro."

The Southron looked displeased. "Aren't you getting just a little above yourself, old man, calling the Prince Salsavadran and the Lord Dranigrastan by their familiar names?" he asked.

"I don't know what you're talking about. Those were the names they gave me; I didn't know they had any others."

The Southron started to laugh, then stopped.

"And if I may ask, what is your name, and what business have you with them?" he inquired.

Raud told him his name. "I have something for them. Something they want very badly. If I can find a place to

stay here, I will wait until they return—"

The Southron got to his feet. "Wait here for a moment, Keeper," he said. "I'll be back soon."

He left the desk, going into another room. After a while, he came back. This time he was respectful.

"I was talking to the Lord Dranigrastan—whom you know as Dranigo—on the radio. He and the Prince Salsavadran are lifting clear of the *Issa* in their airboat and coming back here to see you. They should be here in about three hours. If, in the meantime, you wish to bathe and rest, I'll find you a room. And I suppose you'll want something to eat, too...."

He was waiting at the front of the office, looking out the glass wall, when the airboat came in and grounded, and Salvadro and Dranigo jumped out and came hurrying up the walk to the doorway.

"Well, here you are, Keeper," Dranigo greeted him, clasping his hand. Then he saw the bearskin bundle under Raud's arm. "You brought it with you? But didn't you believe that we were coming?"

"Are you going to let us have it?" Salvadro was asking.

"Yes; I will sell it to you, for the price you offered. I am not fit to be Keeper any longer. I lost it. It was stolen from me, the day after I saw you, and I have only yesterday gotten it back. Both my dogs were killed, too. I can no longer keep it safe. Better that you take it with you to Dremna, away from this world where it was made. I have thought, before, that this world and I are both old and good for nothing any more."

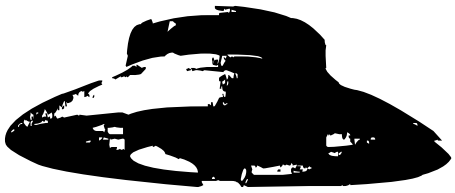
"This world may be old, Keeper," Dranigo said, "but it is the Mother-World, Terra, the world that sent Man to the Stars. And you—when you lost the Crown, you recovered it again."

"The next time, I won't be able to. Too many people will know that the Crown is worth stealing, and the next time, they'll kill me first."

"Well, we said we'd give you twenty thousand trade-tokens for it," Salvadro said. "We'll have them for you as soon as we can draw them from the Government bank, here. Or give you a check and let you draw them as you want them." Raud didn't understand that, and Salvadro didn't try to explain. "And then we'll fly you home."

He shook his head. "No, I have no home. The place where you saw me is Keeper's House, and I am not the Keeper any more. I will stay here and find a place to live, and pay somebody to take care of me...."

With twenty thousand trade-tokens, he could do that. It would buy a house in which he could live, and he could find some woman who had lost her man, who would do his work for him. But he must be careful of the money. Dig a crypt in the corner of his house for it. He wondered if he could find a pair of good dogs and train them to guard it for him....



LAST ENEMY

The last enemy was the toughest of all—and conquering him was in itself almost as dangerous as not conquering. For a strange pattern of beliefs can make assassination an honorable profession!

Along the U-shaped table, the subdued clatter of dinnerware and the buzz of conversation was dying out; the soft music that drifted down from the overhead sound outlets seemed louder as the competing noises diminished. The feast was drawing to a close, and Dallona of Hadron fidgeted nervously with the stem of her wineglass as last-moment doubts assailed her.

The old man at whose right she sat noticed, and reached out to lay his hand on hers.

"My dear, you're worried," he said softly. "You, of all people, shouldn't be, you know."

"The theory isn't complete," she replied. "And I could wish for more positive verification. I'd hate to think I'd got you into this—"

Garnon of Roxor laughed. "No, no!" he assured her. "I'd decided upon this long before you announced the results of your experiments. Ask Girzon; he'll bear me out."

"That's true," the young man who sat at Garnon's left said, leaning forward. "Father has meant to take this step for a long time. He was waiting until after the election, and then he decided to do it now, to give you an opportunity to make experimental use of it."

The man on Dallona's right added his voice. Like the others at the table, he was of medium stature, brown-skinned and dark-eyed, with a wide mouth, prominent cheekbones and a short, square jaw. Unlike the others, he was armed, with a knife and pistol on his belt, and on the breast of his black tunic he wore a scarlet oval patch on which a pair of black wings, with a tapering silver object between them had been superimposed.

"Yes, Lady Dallona; the Lord Garnon and I discussed this, oh, two years ago at the least. Really, I'm surprised that you seem to shrink from it, now. Of course, you're Venus-born, and customs there may be different, but with your scientific knowledge—"

"That may be the trouble, Dirzed," Dallona told him. "A scientist gets in the way of doubting, and one doubts one's own theories most of all."

"That's the scientific attitude, I'm told," Dirzed replied, smiling. "But somehow, I cannot think of you as a scientist." His eyes traveled over her in a way that would have made most women, scientists or otherwise, blush. It gave Dallona of Hadron a feeling of pleasure. Men often looked at her that way, especially here at Darsh. Novelty had something to do with it—her skin was considerably lighter than usual, and there was

a pleasing oddness about the structure of her face. Her alleged Venusian origin was probably accepted as the explanation of that, as of so many other things.

As she was about to reply, a man in dark gray, one of the upper-servants who were accepted as social equals by the Akor-Neb nobles, approached the table. He nodded respectfully to Garnon of Roxor.

"I hate to seem to hurry things, sir, but the boy's ready. He's in a trance-state now," he reported, pointing to the pair of visiplates at the end of the room.

Both of the ten-foot-square plates were activated. One was a solid luminous white; on the other was the image of a boy of twelve or fourteen, seated at a big writing machine. Even allowing for the fact that the boy was in a hypnotic trance, there was an expression of idiocy on his loose-lipped, slack-jawed face, a pervading dullness.

"One of our best sensitives," a man with a beard, several places down the table on Dallona's right, said. "You remember him, Dallona; he produced that communication from the discarnate Assassin, Sirzim. Normally, he's a low-grade imbecile, but in trance-state he's wonderful. And there can be no argument that the communications he produces originates in his own mind; he doesn't have mind enough, of his own, to operate that machine."

Garnon of Roxor rose to his feet, the others rising with him. He unfastened a jewel from the front of his tunic and handed it to Dallona.

"Here, my dear Lady Dallona; I want you to have this," he said. "It's been in the family of Roxor for six generations, but I know that you will appreciate and cherish it." He twisted a heavy ring from his left hand and gave it to his son. He unstrapped his wrist watch and passed it across the table to the gray-clad upper-servant. He gave a pocket case, containing writing tools, slide rule and magnifier, to the bearded man on the other side of Dallona. "Something you can use, Dr. Harnosh," he said. Then he took a belt, with a knife and holstered pistol, from a servant who had brought it to him, and gave it to the man with the red badge. "And something for you, Dirzed. The pistol's by Farnor of Yand, and the knife was forged and tempered on Luna."

The man with the winged-bullet badge took the weapons, exclaiming in appreciation. Then he removed his own belt and buckled on the gift.

"The pistol's fully loaded," Garnon told him.

Dirzed drew it and checked—a man of his craft took no statement about weapons without verification—then slipped it back into the holster.

"Shall I use it?" he asked.

"By all means; I'd had that in mind when I selected it for you."

Another man, to the left of Girzon, received a cigarette case and lighter. He and Garnon hooked fingers and clapped shoulders.

"Our views haven't been the same, Garnon," he said, "but I've always valued your friendship. I'm sorry you're

doing this, now; I believe you'll be disappointed."

Garnon chuckled. "Would you care to make a small wager on that, Nirzav?" he asked. "You know what I'm putting up. If I'm proven right, will you accept the Volitionalist theory as verified?"

Nirzav chewed his mustache for a moment. "Yes, Garnon, I will." He pointed toward the blankly white screen. "If we get anything conclusive on that, I'll have no other choice."

"All right, friends," Garnon said to those around him. "Will you walk with me to the end of the room?"

Servants removed a section from the table in front of him, to allow him and a few others to pass through; the rest of the guests remained standing at the table, facing toward the inside of the room. Garnon's son, Girzon, and the gray-mustached Nirzav of Shonna, walked on his left; Dallona of Hadron and Dr. Harnosh of Hosh on his right. The gray-clad upper-servant, and two or three ladies, and a nobleman with a small chin-beard, and several others, joined them; of those who had sat close to Garnon, only the man in the black tunic with the scarlet badge hung back. He stood still, by the break in the table, watching Garnon of Roxor walk away from him. Then Dirzed the Assassin drew the pistol he had lately received as a gift, hefted it in his hand, thumbed off the safety, and aimed at the back of Garnon's head.

They had nearly reached the end of the room when the pistol cracked. Dallona of Hadron started, almost as though the bullet had crashed into her own body, then caught herself and kept on walking. She closed her eyes and laid a hand on Dr. Harnosh's arm for guidance, concentrating her mind upon a single question. The others went on as though Garnon of Roxor were still walking among them.

"Look!" Harnosh of Hosh cried, pointing to the image in the visiplate ahead. "He's under control!"

They all stopped short, and Dirzed, holstering his pistol, hurried forward to join them. Behind, a couple of servants had approached with a stretcher and were gathering up the crumpled figure that had, a moment ago, been Garnon.

A change had come over the boy at the writing machine. His eyes were still glazed with the stupor of the hypnotic trance, but the slack jaw had stiffened, and the loose mouth was compressed in a purposeful line. As they watched, his hands went out to the keyboard in front of him and began to move over it, and as they did, letters appeared on the white screen on the left.

Garnon of Roxor, discarnate, communicating, they read. The machine stopped for a moment, then began again. *To Dallona of Hadron: The question you asked, after I discarnated, was: What was the last book I read, before the feast? While waiting for my valet to prepare my bath, I read the first ten verses of the fourth Canto of "Splendor of Space," by Larnov of Horka, in my bedroom. When the bath was ready, I marked the page with a strip of message tape, containing a message from the bailiff of*

my estate on the Shevva River, concerning a breakdown at the power plant, and laid the book on the ivory-inlaid table beside the big red chair.

Harnosh of Hosh looked at Dallona inquiringly; she nodded.

"I rejected the question I had in my mind, and substituted that one, after the shot," she said.

He turned quickly to the upper-servant. "Check on that, right away, Kirzon," he directed.

As the upper-servant hurried out, the writing machine started again.

And to my son, Girzon: I will not use your son, Garnon, as a reincarnation-vehicle; I will remain discarnate until he is grown and has a son of his own; if he has no male child, I will reincarnate in the first available male child of the family of Roxor, or of some family allied to us by marriage. In any case, I will communicate before reincarnating.

To Nirzav of Shonna: Ten days ago, when I dined at your home, I took a small knife and cut three notches, two close together and one a little apart from the others, on the under side of the table. As I remember, I sat two places down on the left. If you find them, you will know that I have won that wager that I spoke of a few minutes ago.

"I'll have my butler check on that, right away," Nirzav said. His eyes were wide with amazement, and he had begun to sweat; a man does not casually watch the beliefs of a lifetime invalidated in a few moments.

To Dirzed the Assassin: the machine continued. *You have served me faithfully, in the last ten years, never more so than with the last shot you fired in my service. After you fired, the thought was in your mind that you would like to take service with the Lady Dallona of Hadron, whom you believe will need the protection of a member of the Society of Assassins. I advise you to do so, and I advise her to accept your offer. Her work, since she has come to Darsh, has not made her popular in some quarters. No doubt Nirzav of Shonna can bear me out on that.*

"I won't betray things told me in confidence, or said at the Councils of the Statisticalists, but he's right," Nirzav said. "You need a good Assassin, and there are few better than Dirzed."

I see that this sensitive is growing weary, the letters on the screen spelled out. *His body is not strong enough for prolonged communication. I bid you all farewell, for the time; I will communicate again. Good evening, my friends, and I thank you for your presence at the feast.*

The boy, on the other screen, slumped back in his chair, his face relaxing into its customary expression of vacancy.

"Will you accept my offer of service, Lady Dallona?" Dirzed asked. "It's as Garnon said; you've made enemies."

Dallona smiled at him. "I've not been too deep in my work to know that. I'm glad to accept your offer, Dirzed."

Nirzav of Shonna had already turned away from the group and was hurrying from the room, to call his home for confirmation on the notches made on the underside of his dining table. As he

went out the door, he almost collided with the upper-servant, who was rushing in with a book in his hand.

"Here it is," the latter exclaimed, holding up the book. "Larnov's 'Splendor of Space,' just where he said it would be. I had a couple of servants with me as witnesses; I can call them in now, if you wish." He handed the book to Harnosh of Hosh. "See, a strip of message tape in it, at the tenth verse of the Fourth Canto."

Nirzav of Shonna re-entered the room; he was chewing his mustache and muttering to himself. As he rejoined the group in front of the now dark visiplates, he raised his voice, addressing them all generally.

"My butler found the notches, just as the communication described," he said. "This settles it! Garnon, if you're where you can hear me, you've won. I can't believe in the Statisticalist doctrines after this, or in the political program based upon them. I'll announce my change of attitude at the next meeting of the Executive Council, and resign my seat. I was elected by Statisticalist votes, and I cannot hold office as a Volitionalist."

"You'll need a couple of Assassins, too," the nobleman with the chin-beard told him. "Your former colleagues and fellow-party-members are regrettably given to the forcible discarnation of those who differ with them."

"I've never employed personal Assassins before," Nirzav replied, "but I think you're right. As soon as I get home, I'll call Assassins' Hall and make the necessary arrangements."

"Better do it now," Girzon of Roxor told him, lowering his voice. "There are over a hundred guests here, and I can't vouch for all of them. The Statisticalists would be sure to have a spy planted among them. My father was one of their most dangerous opponents, when he was on the Council; they've always been afraid he'd come out of retirement and stand for re-election. They'd want to make sure he was really discarnate. And if that's the case, you can be sure your change of attitude is known to old Mirzark of Bashad by this time. He won't dare allow you to make a public renunciation of Statisticalism." He turned to the other nobleman. "Prince Jirzyn, why don't you call the Volitionist headquarters and have a couple of our Assassins sent here to escort Lord Nirzav home?"

"I'll do that immediately," Jirzyn of Starpha said. "It's as Lord Girzon says; we can be pretty sure there was a spy among the guests, and now that you've come over to our way of thinking, we're responsible for your safety."

He left the room to make the necessary visiphone call. Dallona, accompanied by Dirzed, returned to her place at the table, where she was joined by Harnosh of Hosh and some of the others.

"There's no question about the results," Harnosh was exulting. "I'll grant that the boy might have picked up some of that stuff telepathically from the carnate minds present here; even from the mind of Garnon, before he was discarnated. But he could not have

picked up enough data, in that way, to make a connected and coherent communication. It takes a sensitive with a powerful mind of his own to practice telesthesia, and that boy's almost an idiot." He turned to Dallona. "You asked a question, mentally, after Garnon was discarnate, and got an answer that could have been contained only in Garnon's mind. I think it's conclusive proof that the discarnate Garnon was fully conscious and communicating."

"Dirzed also asked a question, mentally, after the discarnation, and got an answer. Dr. Harnosh, we can state positively that the surviving individuality is fully conscious in the discarnate state, is telepathically sensitive, and is capable of telepathic communication with other minds," Dallona agreed. "And in view of our earlier work with memory-recalls, we're justified in stating positively that the individual is capable of exercising choice in reincarnation vehicles."

"My father had been considering voluntary discarnation for a long time," Girzon of Roxor said. "Ever since the discarnation of my mother. He deferred that step because he was unwilling to deprive the Volitionalist Party of his support. Now it would seem that he has done more to combat Statisticalism by discarnating than he ever did in his carnate existence."

"I don't know, Girzon," Jirzyn of Starpha said, as he joined the group. "The Statisticalists will denounce the whole thing as a prearranged fraud. And if they can discarnate the Lady Dallona before she can record her testimony under truth hypnosis or on a lie detector, we're no better off than we were before. Dirzed, you have a great responsibility in guarding the Lady Dallona; some extraordinary security precautions will be needed."

In his office, in the First Level city of Dhergabar, Tortha Karf, Chief of Paratime Police, leaned forward in his chair to hold his lighter for his special assistant, Verkan Vall, then lit his own cigarette. He was a man of middle age—his three hundredth birthday was only a decade or so off—and he had begun to acquire a double chin and a bulge at his waistline. His hair, once black, had turned a uniform iron-gray and was beginning to thin in front.

"What do you know about the Second Level Akor-Neb Sector, Vall?" he inquired. "Ever work in that paratime-area?"

Verkan Vall's handsome features became even more immobile than usual as he mentally pronounced the verbal trigger symbols which should bring hypnotically-acquired knowledge into his conscious mind. Then he shook his head.

"Must be a singularly well-behaved sector, sir," he said. "Or else we've been lucky, so far. I never was on an Akor-Neb operation; don't even have a hypno-mech for that sector. All I know is from general reading.

"Like all the Second Level, its timelines descend from the probability of one or more shiploads of colonists having come to Terra from Mars about seventy-five to a hundred thousand years

ago, and then having been cut off from the home planet and forced to develop a civilization of their own here. The Akor-Neb civilization is of a fairly high culture-order, even for Second Level. An atomic-power, interplanetary culture; gravity-counteraction, direct conversion of nuclear energy to electrical power, that sort of thing. We buy fine synthetic plastics and fabrics from them." He fingered the material of his smartly-cut green police uniform. "I think this cloth is Akor-Neb. We sell a lot of Venusian _zerfa_-leaf; they smoke it, straight and mixed with tobacco. They have a single System-wide government, a single race, and a universal language. They're a dark-brown race, which evolved in its present form about fifty thousand years ago; the present civilization is about ten thousand years old, developed out of the wreckage of several earlier civilizations which decayed or fell through wars, exhaustion of resources, et cetera. They have legends, maybe historical records, of their extraterrestrial origin."

Tortha Karf nodded. "Pretty good, for consciously acquired knowledge," he commented. "Well, our luck's run out, on that sector; we have troubles there, now. I want you to go iron them out. I know, you've been going pretty hard, lately—that nighthound business, on the Fourth Level Europo-American Sector, wasn't any picnic. But the fact is that a lot of my ordinary and deputy assistants have a little too much regard for the alleged sanctity of human life, and this is something that may need some pretty drastic action."

"Some of our people getting out of line?" Verkan Vall asked.

"Well, the data isn't too complete, but one of our people has run into trouble on that sector, and needs rescuing—a psychic-science researcher, a young lady named Hadron Dalla. I believe you know her, don't you?" Tortha Karf asked innocently.

"Slightly," Verkan Vall deadpanned. "I enjoyed a brief but rather hectic companionate-marriage with her, about twenty years ago. What sort of a jam's little Dalla got herself into, now?"

"Well, frankly, we don't know. I hope she's still alive, but I'm not unduly optimistic. It seems that about a year ago, Dr. Hadron transposed to the Second Level, to study alleged proof of reincarnation which the Akor-Neb people were reported to possess. She went to Gindrabar, on Venus, and transposed to the Second Paratime Level, to a station maintained by Outtime Import & Export Trading Corporation—a _zerfa_ plantation just east of the High Ridge country. There she assumed an identity as the daughter of a planter, and took the name of Dallona of Hadron. Parenthetically, all Akor-Neb family-names are prepositional; family-names were originally place names. I believe that ancient Akor-Neb marital relations were too complicated to permit exact establishment of paternity. And all Akor-Neb men's personal names have *-irz-* or *-arn-* inserted in the middle, and women's names end in *-itra-* or *-ona*. You could call yourself Virzal of Verkan, for instance.

"Anyhow, she made the Second Level Venus-Terra trip on a regular passenger liner, and landed at the Akor-Neb city of Ghamma, on the upper Nile. There she established contact with the Outtime Trading Corporation representative, Zortan Brend, locally known as Brarnend of Zorda. He couldn't call himself Brarnend of Zortan—in the Akor-Neb language, *zortan* is a particularly nasty dirty-word. Hadron Dalla spent a few weeks at his residence, briefing herself on local conditions. Then she went to the capital city, Darsh, in eastern Europe, and enrolled as a student at something called the Independent Institute for Reincarnation Research, having secured a letter of introduction to its director, a Dr. Harnosh of Hosh.

"Almost at once, she began sending in reports to her home organization, the Rhogom Memorial Foundation of Psychic Science, here at Dhergabar, through Zortan Brend. The people there were wildly enthusiastic. I don't have more than the average intelligent—I hope—layman's knowledge of psychics, but Dr. Volzar Darv, the director of Rhogom Foundation, tells me that even in the present incomplete form, her reports have opened whole new horizons in the science. It seems that these Akor-Neb people have actually demonstrated, as a scientific fact, that the human individuality reincarnates after physical death—that your personality, and mine, have existed, as such, for ages, and will exist for ages to come. More, they have means of recovering, from almost anybody, memories of past reincarnations.

"Well, after about a month, the people at this Reincarnation Institute realized that this Dallona of Hadron wasn't any ordinary student. She probably had trouble keeping down to the local level of psychic knowledge. So, as soon as she'd learned their techniques, she was allowed to undertake experimental work of her own. I imagine she let herself out on that; as soon as she'd mastered the standard Akor-Neb methods of recovering memories of past reincarnations, she began refining and developing them more than the local yokels had been able to do in the past thousand years. I can't tell you just what she did, because I don't know the subject, but she must have lit things up properly. She got quite a lot of local publicity; not only scientific journals, but general newscasts.

"Then, four days ago, she disappeared, and her disappearance seems to have been coincident with an unsuccessful attempt on her life. We don't know as much about this as we should; all we have is Zortan Brend's account.

"It seems that on the evening of her disappearance, she had been attending the voluntary discarnation feast—suicide party—of a prominent nobleman named Garnon of Roxor. Evidently when the Akor-Neb people get tired of their current reincarnation they invite in their friends, throw a big party, and then do themselves in in an atmosphere of general conviviality. Frequently they take poison or inhale lethal gas; this fellow had his personal trigger man shoot him through the head. Dalla was one of the guests of honor, along with this

Harnosh of Hosh. They'd made rather elaborate preparations, and after the shooting they got a detailed and apparently authentic spirit-communication from the late Garnon. The voluntary discarnation was just a routine social event, it seems, but the communication caused quite an uproar, and rated top place on the System-wide newscasts, and started a storm of controversy.

"After the shooting and the communication, Dalla took the officiating gun artist, one Dirzed, into her own service. This Dirzed was spoken of as a generally respected member of something called the Society of Assassins, and that'll give you an idea of what things are like on that sector, and why I don't want to send anybody who might develop trigger-finger cramp at the wrong moment. She and Dirzed left the home of the gentleman who had just had himself discarnated, presumably for Dalla's apartment, about a hundred miles away. That's the last that's been heard of either of them.

"This attempt on Dalla's life occurred while the pre-mortem revels were still going on. She lived in a six-room apartment, with three servants, on one of the upper floors of a three-thousand-foot tower—Akor-Neb cities are built vertically, with considerable interval between units—and while she was at this feast, a package was delivered at the apartment, ostensibly from the Reincarnation Institute and made up to look as though it contained record tapes. One of the servants accepted it from a service employee of the apartments. The next morning, a little before noon, Dr. Harnosh of Hosh called her on the visiphone and got no answer; he then called the apartment manager, who entered the apartment. He found all three of the servants dead, from a lethal-gas bomb which had exploded when one of them had opened this package. However, Hadron Dalla had never returned to the apartment, the night before."

Verkan Vall was sitting motionless, his face expressionless as he ran Tortha Karf's narrative through the intricate semantic and psychological processes of the First Level mentality. The fact that Hadron Dalla had been a former wife of his had been relegated to one corner of his consciousness and contained there; it was not a fact that would, at the moment, contribute to the problem or to his treatment of it.

"The package was delivered while she was at this suicide party," he considered. "It must, therefore, have been sent by somebody who either did not know she would be out of the apartment, or who did not expect it to function until after her return. On the other hand, if her disappearance was due to hostile action, it was the work of somebody who knew she was at the feast and did not want her to reach her apartment again. This would seem to exclude the sender of the package bomb."

Tortha Karf nodded. He had reached that conclusion, himself.

"Thus," Verkan Vall continued, "if her disappearance was the work of an enemy, she must have two enemies, each working in ignorance of the other's

plans."

"What do you think she did to provoke such enmity?"

"Well, of course, it just might be that Dalla's normally complicated love-life had got a little more complicated than usual and short-circuited on her," Verkan Vall said, out of the fullness of personal knowledge, "but I doubt that, at the moment. I would think that this affair has political implications."

"So?" Tortha Karf had not thought of politics as an explanation. He waited for Verkan Vall to elaborate.

"Don't you see, chief?" the special assistant asked. "We find a belief in reincarnation on many time-lines, as a religious doctrine, but these people accept it as a scientific fact. Such acceptance would carry much more conviction; it would influence a people's entire thinking. We see it reflected in their disregard for death—suicide as a social function, this Society of Assassins, and the like. It would naturally color their political thinking, because politics is nothing but common action to secure more favorable living conditions, and to these people, the term 'living conditions' includes not only the present life, but also an indefinite number of future lives as well. I find this title, 'Independent' Institute, suggestive. Independent of what? Possibly of partisan affiliation."

"But wouldn't these people be grateful to her for her new discoveries, which would enable them to plan their future reincarnations more intelligently?" Tortha Karf asked.

"Oh, chief!" Verkan Vall reproached. "You know better than that! How many times have our people got in trouble on other time-lines because they divulged some useful scientific fact that conflicted with the locally revered nonsense? You show me ten men who cherish some religious doctrine or political ideology, and I'll show you nine men whose minds are utterly impervious to any factual evidence which contradicts their beliefs, and who regard the producer of such evidence as a criminal who ought to be suppressed. For instance, on the Fourth Level Europo-American Sector, where I was just working, there is a political sect, the Communists, who, in the territory under their control, forbid the teaching of certain well-established facts of genetics and heredity, because those facts do not fit the world-picture demanded by their political doctrines. And on the same sector, a religious sect recently tried, in some sections successfully, to outlaw the teaching of evolution by natural selection."

Tortha Karf nodded. "I remember some stories my grandfather told me, about his narrow escapes from an organization called the Holy Inquisition, when he was a paratime trader on the Fourth Level, about four hundred years ago. I believe that thing's still operating, on the Europo-American Sector, under the name of the NKVD. So you think Dalla may have proven something that conflicted with local reincarnation theories, and somebody who had a vested interest in maintaining those theories is trying to stop her?"

"You spoke of a controversy over

the communication alleged to have originated with this voluntarily discarnated nobleman. That would suggest a difference of opinion on the manner of nature of reincarnation or the discarnate state. This difference may mark the dividing line between the different political parties. Now, to get to this Darsh place, do I have to go to Venus, as Dalla did?"

"No. The Outtime Trading Corporation has transposition facilities at Ravvanan, on the Nile, which is spatially co-existent with the city of Ghamma on the Akor-Neb Sector, where Zortan Brend is. You transpose through there, and Zortan Brend will furnish you transportation to Darsh. It'll take you about two days, here, getting your hypnomech indoctrinations and having your skin pigmented, and your hair turned black. I'll notify Zortan Brend at once that you're coming through. Is there anything special you'll want?"

"Why, I'll want an abstract of the reports Dalla sent back to Rhogom Foundation. It's likely that there is some clue among them as to whom her discoveries may have antagonized. I'm going to be a Venusian _zerfa_-planter, a friend of her father's; I'll want full hypno-mech indoctrination to enable me to play that part. And I'll want to familiarize myself with Akor-Neb weapons and combat techniques. I think that will be all, chief."

The last of the tall city-units of Ghamma were sliding out of sight as the ship passed over them—shaft-like buildings that rose two or three thousand feet above the ground in clumps of three or four or six, one at each corner of the landing stages set in series between them. Each of these units stood in the middle of a wooded park some five miles square; no unit was much more or less than twenty miles from its nearest neighbor, and the land between was the uniform golden-brown of ripening grain, crisscrossed with the threads of irrigation canals and dotted here and there with sturdy farm-village buildings and tall, stacklike granaries. There were a few other ships in the air at the fifty-thousand-foot level, and below, swarms of small airboats darted back and forth on different levels, depending upon speed and direction. Far ahead, to the northeast, was the shimmer of the Red Sea and the hazy bulk of Asia Minor beyond.

Verkan Vall—the Lord Virzal of Verkan, temporarily—stood at the glass front of the observation deck, looking down. He was a different Verkan Vall from the man who had talked with Tortha Karf in the latter's office, two days before. The First Level cosmeticists had worked miracles upon him with their art. His skin was a soft chocolate-brown, now; his hair was jet-black, and so were his eyes. And in his subconscious mind, instantly available to consciousness, was a vast body of knowledge about conditions on the Akor-Neb sector, as well as a complete command of the local language, all hypnotically acquired.

He knew that he was looking down upon one of the minor provincial cities of a very respectably advanced civilization. A civilization which built its cities vertically, since it had learned to counteract gravitation. A civilization

which still depended upon natural cereals for food, but one which had learned to make the most efficient use of its soil. The network of dams and irrigation canals which he saw was as good as anything on his own paratime level. The wide dispersal of buildings, he knew, was a heritage of a series of disastrous atomic wars of several thousand years before; the Akor-Neb people had come to love the wide inter-vistas of open country and forest, and had continued to scatter their buildings, even after the necessity had passed. But the slim, towering buildings could only have been reared by a people who had banished nationalism and, with it, the threat of total war. He contrasted them with the ground-hugging dome cities of the Khiftan civilization, only a few thousand parayears distant.

Three men came out of the lounge behind him and joined him. One was, like himself, a disguised paratimer from the First Level—the Outtime Export and Import man, Zortan Brend, here known as Brarnend of Zorda. The other two were Akor-Neb people, and both wore the black tunics and the winged-bullet badges of the Society of Assassins. Unlike Verkan Vall and Zortan Brend, who wore shoulder holsters under their short tunics, the Assassins openly displayed pistols and knives on their belts.

"We heard that you were coming two days ago, Lord Virzal," Zortan Brend said. "We delayed the take-off of this ship, so that you could travel to Darsh as inconspicuously as possible. I also booked a suite for you at the Solar Hotel, at Darsh. And these are your Assassins—Olirzon, and Marnik."

Verkan Vall hooked fingers and clapped shoulders with them.

"Virzal of Verkan," he identified himself. "I am satisfied to intrust myself to you."

"We'll do our best for you, Lord Virzal," the older of the pair, Olirzon, said. He hesitated for a moment, then continued: "Understand, Lord Virzal, I only ask for information useful in serving and protecting you. But is this of the Lady Dallona a political matter?"

"Not from our side," Verkan Vall told him. "The Lady Dallona is a scientist, entirely nonpolitical. The Honorable Brarnend is a business man; he doesn't meddle with politics as long as the politicians leave him alone. And I'm a planter on Venus; I have enough troubles, with the natives, and the weather, and blue-rot in the *zerfa* plants, and poison roaches, and javelin bugs, without getting into politics. But psychic science is inextricably mixed with politics, and the Lady Dallona's work had evidently tended to discredit the theory of Statistical Reincarnation."

"Do you often make understatements like that, Lord Virzal?" Olirzon grinned. "In the last six months, she's knocked Statistical Reincarnation to splinters."

"Well, I'm not a psychic scientist, and as I said, I don't know much about Terran politics," Verkan Vall replied. "I know that the Statisticalists favor complete socialization and political control of the whole economy, because they

want everybody to have the same opportunities in every reincarnation. And the Volitionalists believe that everybody reincarnates as he pleases, and so they favor continuance of the present system of private ownership of wealth and private profit under a system of free competition. And that's about all I do know. Naturally, as a land-owner and the holder of a title of nobility, I'm a Volitionalist in politics, but the socialization issue isn't important on Venus. There is still too much unseated land there, and too many personal opportunities, to make socialism attractive to anybody."

"Well, that's about it," Zortan Brend told him. "I'm not enough of a psychicist to know what the Lady Dallona's been doing, but she's knocked the theoretical basis from under Statistical Reincarnation, and that's the basis, in turn, of Statistical Socialism. I think we'll find that the Statisticalist Party is responsible for whatever happened to her."

Marnik, the younger of the two Assassins, hesitated for a moment, then addressed Verkan Vall:

"Lord Virzal, I know none of the personalities involved in this matter, and I speak without wishing to give offense, but is it not possible that the Lady Dallona and the Assassin Dirzed may have gone somewhere together voluntarily? I have met Dirzed, and he has many qualities which women find attractive, and he is by no means indifferent to the opposite sex. You understand, Lord Virzal—"

"I understand all too perfectly, Marnik," Verkan Vall replied, out of the fullness of experience. "The Lady Dallona has had affairs with a number of men, myself among them. But under the circumstances, I find that explanation unthinkable."

Marnik looked at him in open skepticism. Evidently, in his book, where an attractive man and a beautiful woman were concerned, that explanation was never unthinkable.

"The Lady Dallona is a scientist," Verkan Vall elaborated. "She is not above diverting herself with love affairs, but that's all they are—a not too important form of diversion. And, if you recall, she had just participated in a most significant experiment: you can be sure that she had other things on her mind at the time than pleasure jaunts with good-looking Assassins."

The ship was passing around the Caucasus Mountains, with the Caspian Sea in sight ahead, when several of the crew appeared on the observation deck and began preparing the shielding to protect the deck from gunfire. Zortan Brend inquired of the petty officer in charge of the work as to the necessity.

"We've been getting reports of trouble at Darsh, sir," the man said. "Newscast bulletins every couple of minutes: rioting in different parts of the city. Started yesterday afternoon, when a couple of Statisticalist members of the Executive Council resigned and went over to the Volitionalists. Lord Nirzav of Shonna, the only nobleman of any importance in the Statisticalist Party, was one of them; he was shot immediately

afterward, while leaving the Council Chambers, along with a couple of Assassins who were with him. Some people in an airboat sprayed them with a machine rifle as they came out onto the landing stage."

The two Assassins exclaimed in horrified anger over this.

"That wasn't the work of members of the Society of Assassins!" Olirzon declared. "Even after he'd resigned, the Lord Nirzav was still immune till he left the Government Building. There's too blasted much illegal assassination going on!"

"What happened next?" Verkan Vall wanted to know.

"About what you'd expect, sir. The Volitionalists weren't going to take that quietly. In the past eighteen hours, four prominent Statisticalists were forcibly discarnated, and there was even a fight in Mirzark of Bashad's house, when Volitionalist Assassins broke in; three of them and four of Mirzark's Assassins were discarnated."

"You know, something is going to have to be done about that, too," Olirzon said to Marnik. "It's getting to a point where these political faction fights are being carried on entirely between members of the Society. In Ghamma alone, last year, thirty or forty of our members were discarnated that way."

"Plug in a newscast visiplate, Karnil," Zortan Brend told the petty officer. "Let's see what's going on in Darsh now."

In Darsh, it seemed, an uneasy peace was being established. Verkan Vall watched heavily-armed airboats and light combat ships patrolling among the high towers of the city. He saw a couple of minor riots being broken up by the blue-uniformed Constabulary, with considerable shooting and a ruthless disregard for who might get shot. It wasn't exactly the sort of policing that would have been tolerated in the First Level Civil Order Section, but it seemed to suit Akor-Neb conditions. And he listened to a series of angry recriminations and contradictory statements by different politicians, all of whom blamed the disorders on their opponents. The Volitionalists spoke of the Statisticalists as "insane criminals" and "underminers of social stability," and the Statisticalists called the Volitionalists "reactionary criminals" and "enemies of social progress." Politicians, he had observed, differed little in their vocabularies from one time-line to another.

This kept up all the while the ship was passing over the Caspian Sea; as they were turning up the Volga valley, one of the ship's officers came down from the control deck, above.

"We're coming into Darsh, now," he said, and as Verkan Vall turned from the visiplate to the forward windows, he could see the white and pastel-tinted towers of the city rising above the hardwood forests that covered the whole Volga basin on this sector. "Your luggage has been put into the airboat, Lord Virzal and Honorable Assassins, and it's ready for launching whenever you are." The officer glanced at his watch. "We dock at Commercial Center in twenty minutes; we'll be passing the Solar Ho-

tel in ten."

They all rose, and Verkan Vall hooked fingers and clapped shoulders with Zortan Brend.

"Good luck, Lord Virzal," the latter said. "I hope you find the Lady Dallona safe and carnate. If you need help, I'll be at Mercantile House for the next day or so; if you get back to Ghamma before I do, you know who to ask for there."

A number of assassins loitered in the hallways and offices of the Independent Institute of Reincarnation Research when Verkan Vall, accompanied by Marnik, called there that afternoon. Some of them carried submachine-guns or sleep-gas projectors, and they were stopping people and questioning them. Marnik needed only to give them a quick gesture and the words, "Assassins' Truce," and he and his client were allowed to pass. They entered a lifter tube and floated up to the office of Dr. Harnosh of Hosh, with whom Verkan Vall had made an appointment.

"I'm sorry, Lord Virzal," the director of the Institute told him, "but I have no idea what has befallen the Lady Dallona, or even if she is still carnate. I am quite worried; I admired her extremely, both as an individual and as a scientist. I do hope she hasn't been discarnated; that would be a serious blow to science. It is fortunate that she accomplished as much as she did, while she was with us."

"You think she is no longer carnate, then?"

"I'm afraid so. The political effects of her discoveries—" Harnosh of Hosh shrugged sadly. "She was devoted, to a rare degree, to her work. I am sure that nothing but her discarnation could have taken her away from us, at this time, with so many important experiments still uncompleted."

Marnik nodded to Verkan Vall, as much as to say: "You were right."

"Well, I intend acting upon the assumption that she is still carnate and in need of help, until I am positive to the contrary," Verkan Vall said. "And in the latter case, I intend finding out who discarnated her, and send him to apologize for it in person. People don't forcibly discarnate my friends with impunity."

"Sound attitude," Dr. Harnosh commented. "There's certainly no positive evidence that she isn't still carnate. I'll gladly give you all the assistance I can, if you'll only tell me what you want."

"Well, in the first place," Verkan Vall began, "just what sort of work was she doing?" He already knew the answer to that, from the reports she had sent back to the First Level, but he wanted to hear Dr. Harnosh's version. "And what, exactly, are the political effects you mentioned? Understand, Dr. Harnosh, I am really quite ignorant of any scientific subject unrelated to *zerfa* culture, and equally so of Terran politics. Politics, on Venus, is mainly a question of who gets how much graft out of what."

Dr. Harnosh smiled; evidently he had heard about Venusian politics. "Ah, yes, of course. But you are familiar with the main differences between Statistical

and Volitional reincarnation theories?"

"In a general way. The Volitionalists hold that the discarnate individuality is fully conscious, and is capable of something analogous to sense-perception, and is also capable of exercising choice in the matter of reincarnation vehicles, and can reincarnate or remain in the discarnate state as it chooses. They also believe that discarnate individualities can communicate with one another, and with at least some carnate individualities, by telepathy," he said. "The Statisticalists deny all this; their opinion is that the discarnate individuality is in a more or less somnambulistic state, that it is drawn by a process akin to tropism to the nearest available reincarnation vehicle, and that it must reincarnate in and only in that vehicle. They are labeled Statisticalists because they believe that the process of reincarnation is purely at random, or governed by unknown and uncontrollable causes, and is unpredictable except as to aggregates."

"That's a fairly good generalized summary," Dr. Harnosh of Hosh grudged, unwilling to give a mere layman too much credit. He dipped a spoon into a tobacco humidor, dusted the tobacco lightly with dried *zerfa*, and rammed it into his pipe. "You must understand that our modern Statisticalists are the intellectual heirs of those ancient materialistic thinkers who denied the possibility of any discarnate existence, or of any extraphysical mind, or even of extrasensory perception. Since all these things have been demonstrated to be facts, the materialistic dogma has been broadened to include them, but always strictly within the frame of materialism.

"We have proven, for instance, that the human individuality can exist in a discarnate state, and that it reincarnates into the body of an infant, shortly after birth. But the Statisticalists cannot accept the idea of discarnate consciousness, since they conceive of consciousness purely as a function of the physical brain. So they postulate an unconscious discarnate personality, or, as you put it, one in a somnambulistic state. They have to concede memory to this discarnate personality, since it was by recovery of memories of previous reincarnations that discarnate existence and reincarnation were proven to be facts. So they picture the discarnate individuality as a material object, or physical event, of negligible but actual mass, in which an indefinite number of memories can be stored as electronic charges. And they picture it as being drawn irresistibly to the body of the nearest non-incarnated infant. Curiously enough, the reincarnation vehicle chosen is almost always of the same sex as the vehicle of the previous reincarnation, the exceptions being cases of persons who had a previous history of psychological sex-inversion."

Dr. Harnosh remembered the unlighted pipe in his hand, thrust it into his mouth, and lit it. For a moment, he sat with it jutting out of his black beard, until it was drawing to his satisfaction. "This belief in immediate reincarnation leads the Statisticalists, when they fight duels or perform voluntary discarnation, to do so in the neighborhood of maternity

hospitals," he added. "I know, personally, of one reincarnation memory-recall, in which the subject, a Statisticalist, voluntarily discarnated by lethal-gas inhaler in a private room at one of our local maternity hospitals, and reincarnated twenty years later in the city of Jeddul, three thousand miles away." The square black beard jiggled as the scientist laughed.

"Now, as to the political implications of these contradictory theories: Since the Statisticalists believe that they will reincarnate entirely at random, their aim is to create an utterly classless social and economic order, in which, theoretically, each individuality will reincarnate into a condition of equality with everybody else. Their political program, therefore, is one of complete socialization of all means of production and distribution, abolition of hereditary titles and inherited wealth—eventually, all private wealth—and total government control of all economic, social and cultural activities. Of course," Dr. Harnosh apologized, "politics isn't my subject; I wouldn't presume to judge how that would function in practice."

"I would," Verkan Vall said shortly, thinking of all the different time-lines on which he had seen systems like that in operation. "You wouldn't like it, doctor. And the Volitionalists?"

"Well, since they believe that they are able to choose the circumstances of their next reincarnations for themselves, they are the party of the *status quo.* Naturally, almost all the nobles, almost all the wealthy trading and manufacturing families, and almost all professional people, are Volitionalists; most of the workers and peasants are Statisticalists. Or, at least, they were, for the most part, before we began announcing the results of the Lady Dallona's experimental work."

"Ah; now we come to it," Verkan Vall said as the story clarified.

"Yes. In somewhat oversimplified form, the situation is rather like this," Dr. Harnosh of Hosh said. "The Lady Dallona introduced a number of refinements and some outright innovations into our technique of recovering memories of past reincarnations. Previously, it was necessary to keep the subject in an hypnotic trance, during which he or she would narrate what was remembered of past reincarnations, and this would be recorded. On emerging from the trance, the subject would remember nothing; the tape-recording would be all that would be left. But the Lady Dallona devised a technique by which these memories would remain in what might be called the fore part of the subject's subconscious mind, so that they could be brought to the level of consciousness at will. More, she was able to recover memories of past discarnate existences, something we had never been able to do heretofore." Dr. Harnosh shook his head. "And to think, when I first met her, I thought that she was just another sensation-seeking young lady of wealth, and was almost about to refuse her enrollment!"

He wasn't the only one whom little Dalla had surprised, Verkan Vall thought. At least, he had been pleasantly surprised.

"You see, this entirely disproves the Statistical Theory of Reincarnation. For example, we got a fine set of memory-recalls from one subject, for four previous reincarnations and four intercarnations. In the first of these, the subject had been a peasant on the estate of a wealthy noble. Unlike most of his fellows, who reincarnated into other peasant families almost immediately after discarnation, this man waited for fifty years in the discarnate state for an opportunity to reincarnate as the son of an over-servant. In his next reincarnation, he was the son of a technician, and received a technical education; he became a physics researcher. For his next reincarnation, he chose the son of a nobleman by a concubine as his vehicle; in his present reincarnation, he is a member of a wealthy manufacturing family, and married into a family of the nobility. In five reincarnations, he has climbed from the lowest to the next-to-highest rung of the social ladder. Few individuals of the class from whence he began this ascent possess so much persistence or determination. Then, of course, there was the case of Lord Garnon of Roxor."

He went on to describe the last experiment in which Hadron Dalla had participated.

"Well, that all sounds pretty conclusive," Verkan Vall commented. "I take it the leaders of the Volitionalist Party here are pleased with the result of the Lady Dallona's work?"

"Pleased? My dear Lord Virzal, they're fairly bursting with glee over it!" Harnosh of Hosh declared. "As I pointed out, the Statisticalist program of socialization is based entirely on the proposition that no one can choose the circumstances of his next reincarnation, and that's been demonstrated to be utter nonsense. Until the Lady Dallona's discoveries were announced, they were the dominant party, controlling a majority of the seats in Parliament and on the Executive Council. Only the Constitution kept them from enacting their entire socialization program long ago, and they were about to legislate constitutional changes which would remove that barrier. They had expected to be able to do so after the forthcoming general elections. But now, social inequality has become desirable: it gives people something to look forward to in the next reincarnation. Instead of wanting to abolish wealth and privilege and nobility, the proletariat want to reincarnate into them." Harnosh of Hosh laughed happily. "So you can see how furious the Statisticalist Party organization is!"

"There's a catch to this, somewhere," Marnik the Assassin, speaking for the first time, declared. "They can't all reincarnate as princes, there aren't enough vacancies to go 'round. And no noble is going to reincarnate as a tractor driver to make room for a tractor driver who wants to reincarnate as a noble."

"That's correct," Dr. Harnosh replied. "There is a catch to it; a catch most people would never admit, even to themselves. Very few individuals possess the will power, the intelligence or the capacity for mental effort displayed by the subject of the case I just quoted.

The average man's interests are almost entirely on the physical side; he actually finds mental effort painful, and makes as little of it as possible. And that is the only sort of effort a discarnate individuality can exert. So, unable to endure the fifty or so years needed to make a really good reincarnation, he reincarnates in a year or so, out of pure boredom, into the first vehicle he can find, usually one nobody else wants." Dr. Harnosh dug out the heel of his pipe and blew through the stem. "But nobody will admit his own mental inferiority, even to himself. Now, every machine operator and field hand on the planet thinks he can reincarnate as a prince or a millionaire. Politics isn't my subject, but I'm willing to bet that since Statistical Reincarnation is an exploded psychic theory, Statisticalist Socialism has been caught in the blast area and destroyed along with it."

Olirzon was in the drawing room of the hotel suite when they returned, sitting on the middle of his spinal column in a reclining chair, smoking a pipe, dressing the edge of his knife with a pocket-hone, and gazing lecherously at a young woman in the visiplate. She was an extremely well-designed young woman, in a rather fragmentary costume, and she was heaving her bosom at the invisible audience in anger, sorrow, scorn, entreaty, and numerous other emotions.

"... this revolting crime," she was declaiming, in a husky contralto, as Verkan Vall and Marnik entered, "foul even for the criminal beasts who conceived and perpetrated it!" She pointed an accusing finger. "This murder of the beautiful Lady Dallona of Hadron!"

Verkan Vall stopped short, considering the possibility of something having been discovered lately of which he was ignorant. Olirzon must have guessed his thought; he grinned reassuringly.

"Think nothing of it, Lord Virzal," he said, waving his knife at the visiplate. "Just political propaganda; strictly for the sparrows. Nice propagandist, though."

"And now," the woman with the magnificent natural resources lowered her voice reverently, "we bring you the last image of the Lady Dallona, and of Dirzed, her faithful Assassin, taken just before they vanished, never to be seen again."

The plate darkened, and there were strains of slow, dirgelike music; then it lighted again, presenting a view of a broad hallway, thronged with men and women in bright varicolored costumes. In the foreground, wearing a tight skirt of deep blue and a short red jacket, was Hadron Dalla, just as she had looked in the solidographs taken in Dhergabar after her alteration by the First Level cosmeticians to conform to the appearance of the Malayoid Akor-Neb people. She was holding the arm of a man who wore the black tunic and red badge of an Assassin, a handsome specimen of the Akor-Neb race. Trust little Dalla for that, Verkan Vall thought. The figures were moving with exaggerated slowness, as though a very fleeting picture were being stretched out as far as possible. Hav-

ing already memorized his former wife's changed appearance, Verkan Vall concentrated on the man beside her until the picture faded.

"All right, Olirzon; what did you get?" he asked.

"Well, first of all, at Assassins' Hall," Olirzon said, rolling up his left sleeve, holding his bare forearm to the light, and shaving a few fine hairs from it to test the edge of his knife. "Of course, they never tell one Assassin anything about the client of another Assassin; that's standard practice. But I was in the Lodge Secretary's office, where nobody but Assassins are ever admitted. They have a big panel in there, with the names of all the Lodge members on it in light-letters; that's standard in all Lodges. If an Assassin is unattached and free to accept a client, his name's in white light. If he has a client, the light's changed to blue, and the name of the client goes up under his. If his whereabouts are unknown, the light's changed to amber. If he is discarnated, his name's removed entirely, unless the circumstances of his discarnation are such as to constitute an injury to the Society. In that case, the name's in red light until he's been properly avenged, or, as we say, till his blood's been mopped up. Well, the name of Dirzed is up in blue light, with the name of Dallona of Hadron under it. I found out that the light had been amber for two days after the disappearance, and then had been changed back to blue. Get it, Lord Virzal?"

Verkan Vall nodded. "I think so. I'd been considering that as a possibility from the first. Then what?"

"Then I was about and around for a couple of hours, buying drinks for people—unattached Assassins, Constabulary detectives, political workers, newscast people. You owe me fifteen System Monetary Units for that, Lord Virzal. What I got, when it's all sorted out—I taped it in detail, as soon as I got back—reduces to this: The Volitionalists are moving mountains to find out who was the spy at Garnon of Roxor's discarnation feast, but are doing nothing but nothing at all to find the Lady Dallona or Dirzed. The Statisticalists are making all sorts of secret efforts to find out what happened to her. The Constabulary blame the Statistos for the package-bomb: they're interested in that because of the discarnation of the three servants by an illegal weapon of indiscriminate effect. They claim that the disappearance of Dirzed and the Lady Dallona was a publicity hoax. The Volitionalists are preparing a line of publicity to deny this."

Verkan Vall nodded. "That ties in with what you learned at Assassins' Hall," he said. "They're hiding out somewhere. Is there any chance of reaching Dirzed through the Society of Assassins?"

Olirzon shook his head. "If you're right—and that's the way it looks to me, too—he's probably just called in and notified the Society that he's still carnate and so is the Lady Dallona, and called off any search the Society might be making for him."

"And I've got to find the Lady

Dallona as soon as I can. Well, if I can't reach her, maybe I can get her to send word to me," Verkan Vall said. "That's going to take some doing, too."

"What did you find out, Lord Virzal?" Olirzon asked. He had a piece of soft leather, now, and was polishing his blade lovingly.

"The Reincarnation Research people don't know anything," Verkan Vall replied. "Dr. Harnosh of Hosh thinks she's discarnate. I did find out that the experimental work she's done, so far, has absolutely disproved the theory of Statistical Reincarnation. The Volitionalists' theory is solidly established."

"Yes, what do you think, Olirzon?" Marnik added. "They have a case on record of a man who worked up from field hand to millionaire in five reincarnations. Deliberately, that is." He went on to repeat what Harnosh of Hosh had said; he must have possessed an almost eidetic memory, for he gave the bearded psychicist's words verbatim, and threw in the gestures and voice-inflections.

Olirzon grinned. "You know, there's a chance for the easy-money boys," he considered. "'You, too, can Reincarnate as a millionaire! Let Dr. Nirzutz of Futzbutz Help You! Only 49.98 System Monetary Units for the Secret, Infallible, Autosuggestive Formula.' And would it sell!" He put away the hone and the bit of leather and slipped his knife back into its sheath. "If I weren't a respectable Assassin, I'd give it a try, myself."

Verkan Vall looked at his watch. "We'd better get something to eat," he said. "We'll go down to the main dining room; the Martian Room, I think they call it. I've got to think of some way to let the Lady Dallona know I'm looking for her."

The Martian Room, fifteen stories down, was a big place, occupying almost half of the floor space of one corner tower. It had been fitted to resemble one of the ruined buildings of the ancient and vanished race of Mars who were the ancestors of Terran humanity. One whole side of the room was a gigantic cine-solidograph screen, on which the gullied desolation of a Martian landscape was projected; in the course of about two hours, the scene changed from sunrise through daylight and night to sunrise again.

It was high noon when they entered and found a table; by the time they had finished their dinner, the night was ending and the first glow of dawn was tinting the distant hills. They sat for a while, watching the light grow stronger, then got up and left the table.

There were five men at a table near them; they had come in before the stars had grown dim, and the waiters were just bringing their first dishes. Two were Assassins, and the other three were of a breed Verkan Vall had learned to recognize on any time-line—the arrogant, cocksure, ambitious, leftist politician, who knows what is best for everybody better than anybody else does, and who is convinced that he is inescapably right and that whoever differs with him is not only an ignoramus but a venal scoundrel as well. One was a beefy man in a gold-laced cream-colored dress tunic; he had

thick lips and a too-ready laugh. Another was a rather monkish-looking young man who spoke earnestly and rolled his eyes upward, as though at some celestial vision. The third had the faint powdering of gray in his black hair which was, among the Akor-Neb people, almost the only indication of advanced age.

"Of course it is; the whole thing is a fraud," the monkish young man was saying angrily. "But we can't prove it."

"Oh, Sirzob, here, can prove anything, if you give him time," the beefy one laughed. "The trouble is, there isn't too much time. We know that that communication was a fake, prearranged by the Volitionalists, with Dr. Harnosh and this Dallona of Hadron as their tools. They fed the whole thing to that idiot boy hypnotically, in advance, and then, on a signal, he began typing out this spurious communication. And then, of course, Dallona and this Assassin of hers ran off somewhere together, so that we'd be blamed with discarnating or abducting them, and so that they wouldn't be made to testify about the communication on a lie detector."

A sudden happy smile touched Verkan Vall's eyes. He caught each of his Assassins by an arm.

"Marnik, cover my back," he ordered. "Olirzon, cover everybody at the table. Come on!"

Then he stepped forward, halting between the chairs of the young man and the man with the gray hair and facing the beefy man in the light tunic.

"You!" he barked. "I mean YOU."

The beefy man stopped laughing and stared at him; then sprang to his feet. His hand, streaking toward his left armpit, stopped and dropped to his side as Olirzon aimed a pistol at him. The others sat motionless.

"You," Verkan Vall continued, "are a complete, deliberate, malicious, and unmitigated liar. The Lady Dallona of Hadron is a scientist of integrity, incapable of falsifying her experimental work. What's more, her father is one of my best friends; in his name, and in hers, I demand a full retraction of the slanderous statements you have just made."

"Do you know who I am?" the beefy one shouted.

"I know *what* you are," Verkan Vall shouted back. Like most ancient languages, the Akor-Neb speech included an elaborate, delicately-shaded, and utterly vile vocabulary of abuse; Verkan Vall culled from it judiciously and at length. "And if I don't make myself understood verbally, we'll go down to the object level," he added, snatching a bowl of soup from in front of the monkish-looking young man and throwing it across the table.

The soup was a dark brown, almost black. It contained bits of meat, and mushrooms, and slices of hard-boiled egg, and yellow Martian rock lichen. It produced, on the light tunic, a most spectacular effect.

For a moment, Verkan Vall was afraid the fellow would have an apoplectic stroke, or an epileptic fit. Mastering himself, however, he bowed jerkily.

"Marnark of Bashad," he identified himself. "When and where can my friends consult yours?"

"Lord Virzal of Verkan," the paratimer bowed back. "Your friends can negotiate with mine here and now. I am represented by these Gentlemen-Assassins."

"I won't submit my friends to the indignity of negotiating with them," Marnark retorted. "I insist that you be represented by persons of your own quality and mine."

"Oh, you do?" Olirzon broke in. "Well, is your objection personal to me, or to Assassins as a class? In the first case, I'll remember to make a private project of you, as soon as I'm through with my present employment; if it's the latter, I'll report your attitude to the Society. I'll see what Klarnood, our President-General, thinks of your views."

A crowd had begun to accumulate around the table. Some of them were persons in evening dress, some were Assassins on the hotel payroll, and some were unattached Assassins.

"Well, you won't have far to look for him," one of the latter said, pushing through the crowd to the table.

He was a man of middle age, inclined to stoutness; he made Verkan Vall think of a chocolate figure of Tortha Karf. The red badge on his breast was surrounded with gold lace, and, instead of black wings and a silver bullet, it bore silver wings and a golden dagger. He bowed contemptuously at Marnark of Bashad.

"Klarnood, President-General of the Society of Assassins," he announced. "Marnark of Bashad, did I hear you say that you considered members of the Society as unworthy to negotiate an affair of honor with your friends, on behalf of this nobleman who has been courteous enough to accept your challenge?" he demanded.

Marnark of Bashad's arrogance suffered considerable evaporation-loss. His tone became almost servile.

"Not at all, Honorable Assassin-President," he protested. "But as I was going to ask these gentlemen to represent me, I thought it would be more fitting for the other gentleman to be represented by personal friends, also. In that way—"

"Sorry, Marnark," the gray-haired man at the table said. "I can't second you; I have a quarrel with the Lord Virzal, too." He rose and bowed. "Sirzob of Abo. Inasmuch as the Honorable Marnark is a guest at my table, an affront to him is an affront to me. In my quality as his host, I must demand satisfaction from you, Lord Virzal."

"Why, gladly, Honorable Sirzob," Verkan Vall replied. This was getting better and better every moment. "Of course, your friend, the Honorable Marnark, enjoys priority of challenge; I'll take care of you as soon as I have, shall we say, satisfied, him."

The earnest and rather consecrated-looking young man rose also, bowing to Verkan Vall.

"Yirzol of Narva. I, too, have a quarrel with you, Lord Virzal; I cannot submit to the indignity of having my food

snatched from in front of me, as you just did. I also demand satisfaction."

"And quite rightly, Honorable Yirzol," Verkan Vall approved. "It looks like such good soup, too," he sorrowed, inspecting the front of Marnark's tunic. "My seconds will negotiate with yours immediately; your satisfaction, of course, must come after that of Honorable Sirzob."

"If I may intrude," Klarnood put in smoothly, "may I suggest that as the Lord Virzal is represented by his Assassins, yours can represent all three of you at the same time. I will gladly offer my own good offices as impartial supervisor."

Verkan Vall turned and bowed as to royalty. "An honor, Assassin-President: I am sure no one could act in that capacity more satisfactorily."

"Well, when would it be most convenient to arrange the details?" Klarnood inquired. "I am completely at your disposal, gentlemen."

"Why, here and now, while we're all together," Verkan Vall replied.

"I object to that!" Marnark of Bashad vociferated. "We can't make arrangements here; why, all these hotel people, from the manager down, are nothing but tipsters for the newscast services!"

"Well, what's wrong with that?" Verkan Vall demanded. "You knew that when you slandered the Lady Dallona in their hearing."

"The Lord Virzal of Verkan is correct," Klarnood ruled. "And the offenses for which you have challenged him were also committed in public. By all means, let's discuss the arrangements now." He turned to Verkan Vall. "As the challenged party, you have the choice of weapons; your opponents, then, have the right to name the conditions under which they are to be used."

Marnark of Bashad raised another outcry over that. The assault upon him by the Lord Virzal of Verkan was deliberately provocative, and therefore tantamount to a challenge; he, himself, had the right to name the weapons. Klarnood upheld him.

"Do the other gentlemen make the same claim?" Verkan Vall wanted to know.

"If they do, I won't allow it," Klarnood replied. "You deliberately provoked Honorable Marnark, but the offenses of provoking him at Honorable Sirzob's table, and of throwing Honorable Yirzol's soup at him, were not given with intent to provoke. These gentlemen have a right to challenge, but not to consider themselves provoked."

"Well, I choose knives, then," Marnark hastened to say.

Verkan Vall smiled thinly. He had learned knife-play among the greatest masters of that art in all paratime, the Third Level Khanga pirates of the Caribbean Islands.

"And we fight barefoot, stripped to the waist, and without any parrying weapon in the left hand," Verkan Vall stipulated.

The beefy Marnark fairly licked his chops in anticipation. He outweighed Verkan Vall by forty pounds; he saw an easy victory ahead. Verkan Vall's own

confidence increased at these signs of his opponent's assurance.

"And as for Honorable Sirzob and Honorable Yirzol, I chose pistols," he added.

Sirzob and Yirzol held a hasty whispered conference.

"Speaking both for Honorable Yirzol and for myself," Sirzob announced, "we stipulate that the distance shall be twenty meters, that the pistols shall be fully loaded, and that fire shall be at will after the command."

"Twenty rounds, fire at will, at twenty meters!" Olirzon hooted. "You must think our principal's as bad a shot as you are!"

The four Assassins stepped aside and held a long discussion about something, with considerable argument and gesticulation. Klarnood, observing Verkan Vall's impatience, leaned close to him and whispered:

"This is highly irregular; we must pretend ignorance and be patient. They're laying bets on the outcome. You must do your best, Lord Virzal; you don't want your supporters to lose money."

He said it quite seriously, as though the outcome were otherwise a matter of indifference to Verkan Vall.

Marnark wanted to discuss time and place, and proposed that all three duels be fought at dawn, on the fourth landing stage of Darsh Central Hospital; that was closest to the maternity wards, and statistics showed that most births occurred just before that hour.

"Certainly not," Verkan Vall vetoed. "We'll fight here and now; I don't propose going a couple of hundred miles to meet you at any such unholy hour. We'll fight in the nearest hallway that provides twenty meters' shooting distance."

Marnark, Sirzob and Yirzol all clamored in protest. Verkan Vall shouted them down, drawing on his hypnotically acquired knowledge of Akor-Neb duelling customs. "The code explicitly states that satisfaction shall be rendered as promptly as possible, and I insist on a literal interpretation. I'm not going to inconvenience myself and Assassin-President Klarnood and these four Gentlemen-Assassins just to humor Statisticalist superstitions."

The manager of the hotel, drawn to the Martian Room by the uproar, offered a hallway connecting the kitchens with the refrigerator rooms; it was fifty meters long by five in width, was well-lighted and soundproof, and had a bay in which the seconds and other could stand during the firing.

They repaired thither in a body, Klarnood gathering up several hotel servants on the way through the kitchen. Verkan Vall stripped to the waist, pulled off his ankle boots, and examined Olirzon's knife. Its tapering eight-inch blade was double-edged at the point, and its handle was covered with black velvet to afford a good grip, and wound with gold wire. He nodded approvingly, gripped it with his index finger crooked around the cross-guard, and advanced to meet Marnark of Bashad.

As he had expected, the burly politician was depending upon his greater

brawn to overpower his antagonist. He advanced with a sidling, spread-legged gait, his knife hand against his right hip and his left hand extended in front. Verkan Vall nodded with pleased satisfaction; a wrist-grabber. Then he blinked. Why, the fellow was actually holding his knife reversed, his little finger to the guard and his thumb on the pommel!

Verkan Vall went briskly to meet him, made a feint at his knife hand with his own left, and then side-stepped quickly to the right. As Marnark's left hand grabbed at his right wrist, his left hand brushed against it and closed into a fist, with Marnark's left thumb inside of it, He gave a quick downward twist with his wrist, pulling Marnark off balance.

Caught by surprise, Marnark stumbled, his knife flailing wildly away from Verkan Vall. As he stumbled forward, Verkan Vall pivoted on his left heel and drove the point of his knife into the back of Marnark's neck, twisting it as he jerked it free. At the same time, he released Marnark's thumb. The politician continued his stumble and fell forward on his face, blood spurting from his neck. He gave a twitch or so, and was still.

Verkan Vall stooped and wiped the knife on the dead man's clothes—another Khanga pirate gesture—and then returned it to Olirzon.

"Nice weapon, Olirzon," he said. "It fitted my hand as though I'd been born holding it."

"You used it as though you had, Lord Virzal," the Assassin replied. "Only eight seconds from the time you closed with him."

The function of the hotel servants whom Klarnood had gathered up now became apparent; they advanced, took the body of Marnark by the heels, and dragged it out of the way. The others watched this removal with mixed emotions. The two remaining principals were impassive and frozen-faced. Their two Assassins, who had probably bet heavily on Marnark, were chagrined. And Klarnood was looking at Verkan Vall with a considerable accretion of respect. Verkan Vall pulled on his boots and resumed his clothing.

There followed some argument about the pistols; it was finally decided that each combatant should use his own shoulder-holster weapon. All three were nearly enough alike—small weapons, rather heavier than they looked, firing a tiny ten-grain bullet at ten thousand foot-seconds. On impact, such a bullet would almost disintegrate; a man hit anywhere in the body with one would be killed instantly, his nervous system paralyzed and his heart stopped by internal pressure. Each of the pistols carried twenty rounds in the magazine.

Verkan Vall and Sirzob of Abo took their places, their pistols lowered at their sides, facing each other across a measured twenty meters.

"Are you ready, gentlemen?" Klarnood asked. "You will not raise your pistols until the command to fire; you may fire at will after it. Ready. *Fire*!"

Both pistols swung up to level.

Verkan Vall found Sirzob's head in his sights and squeezed; the pistol kicked back in his hand, and he saw a lance of blue flame jump from the muzzle of Sirzob's. Both weapons barked together, and with the double report came the whip-cracking sound of Sirzob's bullet passing Verkan Vall's head. Then Sirzob's face altered its appearance unpleasantly, and he pitched forward. Verkan Vall thumbed on his safety and stood motionless, while the servants advanced, took Sirzob's body by the heels, and dragged it over beside Marnark's.

"All right; Honorable Yirzol, you're next," Verkan Vall called out.

"The Lord Virzal has fired one shot," one of the opposing seconds objected, "and Honorable Yirzol has a full magazine. The Lord Virzal should put in another magazine."

"I grant him the advantage; let's get on with it," Verkan Vall said.

Yirzol of Narva advanced to the firing point. He was not afraid of death—none of the Akor-Neb people were; their language contained no word to express the concept of total and final extinction—and discarnation by gunshot was almost entirely painless. But he was beginning to suspect that he had made a fool of himself by getting into this affair, he had work in his present reincarnation which he wanted to finish, and his political party would suffer loss, both of his services and of prestige.

"Are you ready, gentlemen?" Klarnood intoned ritualistically. "You will not raise your pistols until the command to fire; you may fire at will after it. Ready, *Fire*!"

Verkan Vall shot Yirzol of Narva through the head before the latter had his pistol half raised. Yirzol fell forward on the splash of blood Sirzob had made, and the servants came forward and dragged his body over with the others. It reminded Verkan Vail of some sort of industrial assembly-line operation. He replaced the two expended rounds in his magazine with fresh ones and slid the pistol back into its holster. The two Assassins whose principals had been so expeditiously massacred were beginning to count up their losses and pay off the winners.

Klarnood, the President-General of the Society of Assassins, came over, hooking fingers and clapping shoulders with Verkan Vall.

"Lord Virzal, I've seen quite a few duels, but nothing quite like that," he said. "You should have been an Assassin!"

That was a considerable compliment. Verkan Vall thanked him modestly.

"I'd like to talk to you privately," the Assassin-President continued. "I think it'll be worth your while if we have a few words together."

Verkan Vall nodded. "My suite is on the fifteenth floor above; will that be all right?" He waited until the losers had finished settling their bets, then motioned to his own pair of Assassins.

As they emerged into the Martian Room again, the manager was waiting;

he looked as though he were about to demand that Verkan Vall vacate his suite. However, when he saw the arm of the President-General of the Society of Assassins draped amicably over his guest's shoulder, he came forward bowing and smiling.

"Larnorm, I want you to put five of your best Assassins to guarding the approaches to the Lord Virzal's suite," Klarnood told him. "I'll send five more from Assassins' Hall to replace them at their ordinary duties. And I'll hold you responsible with your carnate existence for the Lord Virzal's safety in this hotel. Understand?"

"Oh, yes, Honorable Assassin-President; you may trust me. The Lord Virzal will be perfectly safe."

In Verkan Vall's suite, above, Klarnood sat down and got out his pipe, filling it with tobacco lightly mixed with *zerfa*. To his surprise, he saw his host light a plain tobacco cigarette.

"Don't you use *zerfa*?" he asked.

"Very little," Verkan Vall replied. "I grow it. If you'd see the bums who hang around our drying sheds, on Venus, cadging rejected leaves and smoking themselves into a stupor, you'd be frugal in using it, too."

Klarnood nodded. "You know, most men would want a pipe of fifty percent, or a straight *zerfa* cigarette, after what you've been through," he said.

"I'd need something like that, to deaden my conscience, if I had one to deaden," Verkan Vall said. "As it is, I feel like a murderer of babes. That overgrown fool, Marnark, handled his knife like a cow-butcher. The young fellow couldn't handle a pistol at all. I suppose the old fellow, Sirzob, was a fair shot, but dropping him wasn't any great feat of arms, either."

Klarnood looked at him curiously for a moment. "You know," he said, at length, "I believe you actually mean that. Well, until he met you, Marnark of Bashad was rated as the best knife-fighter in Darsh. Sirzob had ten dueling victories to his credit, and young Yirzol four." He puffed slowly on his pipe. "I like you, Lord Virzal; a great Assassin was lost when you decided to reincarnate as a Venusian land-owner. I'd hate to see you discarnated without proper warning. I take it you're ignorant of the intricacies of Terran politics?"

"To a large extent, yes."

"Well, do you know who those three men were?" When Verkan Vall shook his head, Klarnood continued: "Marnark was the son and right-hand associate of old Mirzark of Bashad, the Statisticalist Party leader. Sirzob of Abo was their propaganda director. And Yirzol of Narva was their leading socio-economic theorist, and their candidate for Executive Chairman. In six minutes, with one knife thrust and two shots, you did the Statisticalist Party an injury second only to that done them by the young lady in whose name you were fighting. In two weeks, there will be a planet-wide general election. As it stands, the Statisticalists have a majority of the seats in Parliament and on the Executive Council. As a result of your work and the Lady Dallona's, they'll lose that majority, and more, when the votes are tal-

lied."

"Is that another reason why you like me?" Verkan Vall asked.

"Unofficially, yes. As President-General of the Society of Assassins, I must be nonpolitical. The Society is rigidly so; if we let ourselves become involved, as an organization, in politics, we could control the System Government inside of five years, and we'd be wiped out of existence in fifty years by the very forces we sought to control," Klarnood said. "But personally, I would like to see the Statisticalist Party destroyed. If they succeed in their program of socialization, the Society would be finished. A socialist state is, in its final development, an absolute, total, state; no total state can tolerate extra-legal and para-governmental organizations. So we have adopted the policy of giving a little inconspicuous aid, here and there, to people who are dangerous to the Statisticalists. The Lady Dallona of Hadron, and Dr. Harnosh of Hosh, are such persons. You appear to be another. That's why I ordered that fellow, Larnorm, to make sure you were safe in his hotel."

"Where is the Lady Dallona?" Verkan Vall asked. "From your use of the present tense, I assume you believe her to be still carnate."

Klarnood looked at Verkan Vall keenly. "That's a pretty blunt question, Lord Virzal," he said. "I wish I knew a little more about you. When you and your Assassins started inquiring about the Lady Dallona, I tried to check up on you. I found out that you had come to Darsh from Ghamma on a ship of the family of Zorda, accompanied by Brarnend of Zorda himself. And that's all I could find out. You claim to be a Venusian planter, and you might be. Any Terran who can handle weapons as you can would have come to my notice long ago. But you have no more ascertainable history than if you'd stepped out of another dimension."

That was getting uncomfortably close to the truth. In fact, it was the truth. Verkan Vall laughed.

"Well, confidentially," he said, "I'm from the Arcturus System. I followed the Lady Dallona here from our home planet, and when I have rescued her from among you Solarians, I shall, according to our customs, receive her hand in marriage. As she is the daughter of the Emperor of Arcturus, that'll be quite a good thing for me."

Klarnood chuckled. "You know, you'd only have to tell me that about three or four times and I'd start believing it," he said. "And Dr. Harnosh of Hosh would believe it the first time; he's been talking to himself ever since the Lady Dallona started her experimental work here. Lord Virzal, I'm going to take a chance on you. The Lady Dallona is still carnate, or was four days ago, and the same for Dirzed. They both went into hiding after the discarnation feast of Garnon of Roxor, to escape the enmity of the Statisticalists. Two days after they disappeared, Dirzed called Assassins' Hall and reported this, but told us nothing more. I suppose, in about three or four days, I could re-establish contact with him. We want the public to think

that the Statisticalists made away with the Lady Dallona, at least until the election's over."

Verkan Vall nodded. "I was pretty sure that was the situation," he said. "It may be that they will get in touch with me; if they don't, I'll need your help in reaching them."

"Why do you think the Lady Dallona will try to reach you?"

"She needs all the help she can get. She knows she can get plenty from me. Why do you think I interrupted my search for her, and risked my carnate existence, to fight those people over a matter of verbalisms and political propaganda?" Verkan Vall went to the newscast visiplate and snapped it on. "We'll see if I'm getting results, yet."

The plate lighted, and a handsome young man in a gold-laced green suit was speaking out of it:

"... where he is heavily guarded by Assassins. However, in an exclusive interview with representatives of this service, the Assassin Hirzif, one of the two who seconded the men the Lord Virzal fought, said that in his opinion all of the three were so outclassed as to have had no chance whatever, and that he had already refused an offer of ten thousand System Monetary Units to discarnate the Lord Virzal for the Statisticalist Party. 'When I want to discarnate,' Hirzif the Assassin said, 'I'll invite in my friends and do it properly; until I do, I wouldn't go up against the Lord Virzal of Verkan for ten million S.M.U.'"

Verkan Vall snapped off the visiplate. "See what I mean?" he asked. "I fought those politicians just for the advertising. If Dallona and Dirzed are anywhere near a visiplate, they'll know how to reach me."

"Hirzif shouldn't have talked about refusing that retainer," Klarnood frowned. "That isn't good Assassin ethics. Why, yes, Lord Virzal; that was cleverly planned. It ought to get results. But I wish you'd get the Lady Dallona out of Darsh, and preferably off Terra, as soon as you can. We've benefited by this, so far, but I shouldn't like to see things go much further. A real civil war could develop out of this situation, and I don't want that. Call on me for help; I'll give you a code word to use at Assassins' Hall."

A real civil war was developing even as Klarnood spoke; by mid-morning of the next day, the fighting that had been partially suppressed by the Constabulary had broken out anew. The Assassins employed by the Solar Hotel—heavily re-enforced during the night—had fought a pitched battle with Statisticalist partisans on the landing-stage above Verkan Vall's suite, and now several Constabulary airboats were patrolling around the building. The rule on Constabulary interference seemed to be that while individuals had an unquestionable right to shoot out their differences among themselves, any fighting likely to endanger nonparticipants was taboo.

Just how successful in enforcing this rule the Constabulary were was open to some doubt. Ever since arising, Verkan Vall had heard the crash of small arms and the hammering of automatic weap-

ons in other parts of the towering city-unit. There hadn't been a civil war on the Akor-Neb Sector for over five centuries, he knew, but then, Hadron Dalla, Doctor of Psychic Science, and intertemporal trouble-carrier extraordinary, had only been on this sector for a little under a year. If anything, he was surprised that the explosion had taken so long to occur.

One of the servants furnished to him by the hotel management approached him in the drawing room, holding a four-inch-square wafer of white plastic.

"Lord Virzal, there is a masked Assassin in the hallway who brought this under Assassins' Truce," he said.

Verkan Vall took the wafer and pared off three of the four edges, which showed black where they had been fused. Unfolding it, he found, as he had expected, that the pyrographed message within was in the alphabet and language of the First Paratime Level:

Vall, darling:

Am I glad you got here; this time I really *am* in the middle, but good! The Assassin, Dirzed, who brings this, is in my service. You can trust him implicitly; he's about the only person in Darsh you can trust. He'll bring you to where I am.

Dalla

P.S. I hope you're not still angry about that musician. I told you, at the time, that he was just helping me with an experiment in telepathy.

D.

Verkan Vall grinned at the postscript. That had been twenty years ago, when he'd been eighty and she'd been seventy. He supposed she'd expect him to take up his old relationship with her again. It probably wouldn't last any longer than it had, the other time; he recalled a Fourth Level proverb about the leopard and his spots. It certainly wouldn't be boring, though.

"Tell the Assassin to come in," he directed. Then he tossed the message down on a table. Outside of himself, nobody in Darsh could read it but the woman who had sent it; if, as he thought highly probable, the Statisticalists had spies among the hotel staff, it might serve to reduce some cryptanalyst to gibbering insanity.

The Assassin entered, drawing off a cowllike mask. He was the man whose arm Dalla had been holding in the visiplate picture; Verkan Vall even recognized the extremely ornate pistol and knife on his belt.

"Dirzed the Assassin," he named himself. "If you wish, we can visiphone Assassins' Hall for verification of my identity."

"Lord Virzal of Verkan. And my Assassins, Marnik and Olirzon." They all hooked fingers and clapped shoulders with the newcomer. "That won't be needed," Verkan Vall told Dirzed. "I know you from seeing you with the Lady Dallona, on the visiplate; you're 'Dirzed, her faithful Assassin.'"

Dirzed's face, normally the color of a good walnut gunstock, turned almost black. He used shockingly bad language.

"And that's why I have to wear this abomination," he finished, displaying

the mask. "The Lady Dallona and I can't show our faces anywhere; if we did, every Statisticalist and his six-year-old brat would know us, and we'd be fighting off an army of them in five minutes."

"Where's the Lady Dallona, now?"

"In hiding, Lord Virzal, at a private dwelling dome in the forest; she's most anxious to see you. I'm to take you to her, and I would strongly advise that you bring your Assassins along. There are other people at this dome, and they are not personally loyal to the Lady Dallona. I've no reason to suspect them of secret enmity, but their friendship is based entirely on political expediency."

"And political expediency is subject to change without notice," Verkan Vall finished for him. "Have you an airboat?"

"On the landing stage below. Shall we go now, Lord Virzal?"

"Yes." Verkan Vall made a two-handed gesture to his Assassins, as though gripping a submachine-gun; they nodded, went into another room, and returned carrying light automatic weapons in their hands and pouches of spare drums slung over their shoulders. "And may I suggest, Dirzed, that one of my Assassins drives the airboat? I want you on the back seat with me, to explain the situation as we go."

Dirzed's teeth flashed white against his brown skin as he gave Verkan Vall a quick smile.

"By all means, Lord Virzal; I would much rather be distrusted than to find that my client's friends were not discreet."

There were a couple of hotel Assassins guarding Dirzed's airboat, on the landing stage. Marnik climbed in under the controls, with Olirzon beside him; Verkan Vall and Dirzed entered the rear seat. Dirzed gave Marnik the co-ordinate reference for their destination.

"Now, what sort of a place is this, where we're going?" Verkan Vall asked. "And who's there whom we may or may not trust?"

"Well, it's a dome house belonging to the family of Starpha; they own a five-mile radius around it, oak and beech forest and underbrush, stocked with deer and boar. A hunting lodge. Prince Jirzyn of Starpha, Lord Girzon of Roxor, and a few other top-level Volitionalists, know that the Lady Dallona's hiding there. They're keeping her out of sight till after the election, for propaganda purposes. We've been hiding there since immediately after the discarnation feast of the Lord Garnon of Roxor."

"What happened, after the feast?" Verkan Vall wanted to know.

"Well, you know how the Lady Dallona and Dr. Harnosh of Hosh had this telepathic-sensitive there, in a trance and drugged with a *zerfa*-derivative alkaloid the Lady Dallona had developed. I was Lord Garnon's Assassin; I discarnated him, myself. Why, I hadn't even put my pistol away before he was in control of this sensitive, in a room five stories above the banquet hall; he began communicating at once. We had visiplates to show us what was going on.

"Right away, Nirzav of Shonna, one of the Statisticalist leaders who was a personal friend of Lord Garnon's in spite

of his politics, renounced Statisticalism and went over to the Volitionalists, on the strength of this communication. Prince Jirzyn, and Lord Girzon, the new family-head of Roxor, decided that there would be trouble in the next few days, so they advised the Lady Dallona to come to this hunting lodge for safety. She and I came here in her airboat, directly from the feast. A good thing we did, too; if we'd gone to her apartment, we'd have walked in before that lethal gas had time to clear.

"There are four Assassins of the family of Starpha, and six menservants, and an upper-servant named Tarnod, the gamekeeper. The Starpha Assassins and I have been keeping the rest under observation. I left one of the Starpha Assassins guarding the Lady Dallona when I came for you, under brotherly oath to protect her in my name till I returned."

The airboat was skimming rapidly above the treetops, toward the northern part of the city.

"What's known about that package bomb?" Verkan Vall asked. "Who sent it?"

Dirzed shrugged. "The Statisticalists, of course. The wrapper was stolen from the Reincarnation Research Institute; so was the case. The Constabulary are working on it." Dirzed shrugged again.

The dome, about a hundred and fifty feet in width and some fifty in height, stood among the trees ahead. It was almost invisible from any distance; the concrete dome was of mottled green and gray concrete, trees grew so close as to brush it with their branches, and the little pavilion on the flattened top was roofed with translucent green plastic. As the airboat came in, a couple of men in Assassins' garb emerged from the pavilion to meet them.

"Marnik, stay at the controls," Verkan Vall directed. "I'll send Olirzon up for you if I want you. If there's any trouble, take off for Assassins' Hall and give the code word, then come back with twice as many men as you think you'll need."

Dirzed raised his eyebrows over this. "I hadn't known the Assassin-President had given you a code word, Lord Virzal," he commented. "That doesn't happen very often."

"The Assassin-President has honored me with his friendship," Verkan Vall replied noncommittally, as he, Dirzed and Olirzon climbed out of the airboat. Marnik was holding it an unobtrusive inch or so above the flat top of the dome, away from the edge of the pavilion roof.

The two Assassins greeted him, and a man in upper-servants' garb and wearing a hunting knife and a long hunting pistol approached.

"Lord Virzal of Verkan? Welcome to Starpha Dome. The Lady Dallona awaits you below."

Verkan Vall had never been in an Akor-Neb dwelling dome, but a description of such structures had been included in his hypno-mech indoctrination. Originally, they had been the standard structure for all purposes; about

two thousand elapsed years ago, when nationalism had still existed on the Akor-Neb Sector, the cities had been almost entirely under ground, as protection from air attack. Even now, the design had been retained by those who wished to live apart from the towering city units, to preserve the natural appearance of the landscape. The Starpha hunting lodge was typical of such domes. Under it was a circular well, eighty feet in depth and fifty in width, with a fountain and a shallow circular pool at the bottom. The storerooms, kitchens and servants' quarters were at the top, the living quarters at the bottom, in segments of a wide circle around the well, back of balconies.

"Tarnod, the gamekeeper," Dirzed performed the introductions. "And Erarno and Kirzol, Assassins."

Verkan Vall hooked fingers and clapped shoulders with them. Tarnod accompanied them to the lifter tubes—two percent positive gravitation for descent and two percent negative for ascent—and they all floated down the former, like air-filled balloons, to the bottom level.

"The Lady Dallona is in the gun room," Tarnod informed Verkan Vall, making as though to guide him.

"Thanks, Tarnod; we know the way," Dirzed told him shortly, turning his back on the upper-servant and walking toward a closed door on the other side of the fountain. Verkan Vall and Olirzon followed; for a moment, Tarnod stood looking after them, then he followed the other two Assassins into the ascent tube.

"I don't relish that fellow," Dirzed explained. "The family of Starpha use him for work they couldn't hire an Assassin to do at any price. I've been here often, when I was with the Lord Garnon; I've always thought he had something on Prince Jirzyn."

He knocked sharply on the closed door with the butt of his pistol. In a moment, it slid open, and a young Assassin with a narrow mustache and a tuft of chin beard looked out.

"Ah, Dirzed." He stepped outside. "The Lady Dallona is within; I return her to your care."

Verkan Vall entered, followed by Dirzed and Olirzon. The big room was fitted with reclining chairs and couches and low tables; its walls were hung with the heads of deer and boar and wolves, and with racks holding rifles and hunting pistols and fowling pieces. It was filled with the soft glow of indirect cold light. At the far side of the room, a young woman was seated at a desk, speaking softly into a sound transcriber. As they entered, she snapped it off and rose.

Hadron Dalla wore the same costume Verkan Vall had seen on the visiplate: he recognized her instantly. It took her a second or two to perceive Verkan Vall under the brown skin and black hair of the Lord Virzal of Verkan. Then her face lighted with a happy smile.

"Why, Va-a-a-ll!" she whooped, running across the room and tossing herself into his not particularly reluctant arms. After all, it had been twenty years—"I didn't know you, at first!"

"You mean, in these clothes?" he asked, seeing that she had forgotten, for the moment, the presence of the two Assassins. She had even called him by his First Level name, but that was unimportant—the Akor-Neb affectionate diminutive was formed by omitting the -*irz*- or -*arn*-. "Well, they're not exactly what I generally wear on the plantation." He kissed her again, then turned to his companions. "Your pardon, Gentlemen-Assassins; it's been something over a year since we've seen each other."

Olirzon was smiling at the affectionate reunion; Dirzed wore a look of amused resignation, as though he might have expected something like this to happen. Verkan Vall and Dalla sat down on a couch near the desk.

"That was really sweet of you, Vall, fighting those men for talking about me," she began. "You took an awful chance, though. But if you hadn't, I'd never have known you were in Darsh—Oh-oh! That was why you did it, wasn't it?"

"Well, I had to do something. Everybody either didn't know or weren't saying where you were. I assumed, from the circumstances, that you were hiding somewhere. Tell me, Dalla; do you really have scientific proof of reincarnation? I mean, as an established fact?"

"Oh, yes; these people on this sector have had that for over ten centuries. They have hypnotic techniques for getting back into a part of the subconscious mind that we've never been able to reach. And after I found out how they did it, I was able to adapt some of our hypno-epistemological techniques to it, and..."

"All right; that's what I wanted to know," he cut her off. "We're getting out of here, right away."

"But where?"

"Ghamma, in an airboat I have outside, and then back to the First Level. Unless there's a paratime-transposition conveyor somewhere nearer."

"But why, Vall? I'm not ready to go back; I have a lot of work to do here, yet. They're getting ready to set up a series of control-experiments at the Institute, and then, I'm in the middle of an experiment, a two-hundred-subject memory-recall experiment. See, I distributed two hundred sets of equipment for my new technique—injection-ampoules of this *zerfa*-derivative drug, and sound records of the hypnotic suggestion formula, which can be played on an ordinary reproducer. It's just a crude variant of our hypno-mech process, except that instead of implanting information in the subconscious mind, to be brought at will to the level of consciousness, it works the other way, and draws into conscious knowledge information already in the subconscious mind. The way these people have always done has been to put the subject in an hypnotic trance and then record verbal statements made in the trance state; when the subject comes out of the trance, the record is all there is, because the memories of past reincarnations have never been in the conscious mind. But with my process, the subject can consciously remember everything about his last reincarnation, and as many reincarnations

before that as he wishes to. I haven't heard from any of the people who received these auto-recall kits, and I really must—"

"Dalla, I don't want to have to pull Paratime Police authority on you, but, so help me, if you don't come back voluntarily with me, I will. Security of the secret of paratime transposition."

"Oh, my eye!" Dalla exclaimed. "Don't give me that, Vall!"

"Look, Dalla. Suppose you get discarnated here," Verkan Vall said. "You say reincarnation is a scientific fact. Well, you'd reincarnate on this sector, and then you'd take a memory-recall, under hypnosis. And when you did, the paratime secret wouldn't be a secret any more."

"Oh!" Dalla's hand went to her mouth in consternation. Like every paratimer, she was conditioned to shrink with all her being from the mere thought of revealing to any out-time dweller the secret ability of her race to pass to other time-lines, or even the existence of alternate lines of probability. "And if I took one of the old-fashioned trance-recalls, I'd blat out everything; I wouldn't be able to keep a thing back. And I even know the principles of transposition!" She looked at him, aghast.

"When I get back, I'm going to put a recommendation through department channels that this whole sector be declared out of bounds for all paratime-transposition, until you people at Rhogom Foundation work out the problem of discarnate return to the First Level," he told her. "Now, have you any notes or anything you want to take back with you?"

She rose. "Yes; just what's on the desk. Find me something to put the tape spools and notebooks in, while I'm getting them in order."

He secured a large game bag from under a rack of fowling pieces, and held it while she sorted the material rapidly, stuffing spools of record tape and notebooks into it. They had barely begun when the door slid open and Olirzon, who had gone outside, sprang into the room, his pistol drawn, swearing vilely.

"They've double-crossed us!" he cried. "The servants of Starpha have turned on us." He holstered his pistol and snatched up his submachine-gun, taking cover behind the edge of the door and letting go with a burst in the direction of the lifter tubes. "Got that one!" he grunted.

"What happened, Olirzon?" Verkan Vall asked, dropping the game bag on the table and hurrying across the room.

"I went up to see how Marnik was making out. As I came out of the lifter tube, one of the obscenities took a shot at me with a hunting pistol. He missed me; I didn't miss him. Then a couple more of them were coming up, with fowling pieces; I shot one of them before they could fire, and jumped into the descent tube and came down heels over ears. I don't know what's happened to Marnik." He fired another burst, and swore. "Missed him!"

"Assassins' Truce! Assassins' Truce!" a voice howled out of the descent tube. "Hold your fire, we want to

parley."

"Who is it?" Dirzed shouted, over Olirzon's shoulder. "You, Sarnax? Come on out; we won't shoot."

The young Assassin with the mustache and chin beard emerged from the descent tube, his weapons sheathed and his clasped hands extended in front of him in a peculiarly ecclesiastical-looking manner. Dirzed and Olirzon stepped out of the gun room, followed by Verkan Vall and Hadron Dalla. Olirzon had left his submachine-gun behind. They met the other Assassin by the rim of the fountain pool.

"Lady Dallona of Hadron," the Starpha Assassin began. "I and my colleagues, in the employ of the family of Starpha, have received orders from our clients to withdraw our protection from you, and to discarnate you, and all with you who undertake to protect or support you." That much sounded like a recitation of some established formula; then his voice became more conversational. "I and my colleagues, Erarno and Kirzol and Harnif, offer our apologies for the barbarity of the servants of the family of Starpha, in attacking without declaration of cessation of friendship. Was anybody hurt or discarnated?"

"None of us," Olirzon said. "How about Marnik?"

"He was warned before hostilities were begun against him," Sarnax replied. "We will allow five minutes until—"

Olirzon, who had been looking up the well, suddenly sprang at Dalla, knocking her flat, and at the same time jerking out his pistol. Before he could raise it, a shot banged from above and he fell on his face. Dirzed, Verkan Vall, and Sarnax, all drew their pistols, but whoever had fired the shot had vanished. There was an outburst of shouting above.

"Get to cover," Sarnax told the others. "We'll let you know when we're ready to attack; we'll have to deal with whoever fired that shot, first." He looked at the dead body on the floor, exclaimed angrily, and hurried to the ascent tube, springing upward.

Verkan Vall replaced the small pistol in his shoulder holster and took Olirzon's belt, with his knife and heavier pistol.

"Well, there you see," Dirzed said, as they went back to the gun room. "So much for political expediency."

"I think I understand why your picture and the Lady Dallona's were exhibited so widely," Verkan Vall said. "Now, anybody would recognize your bodies, and blame the Statisticalists for discarnating you."

"That thought had occurred to me, Lord Virzal," Dirzed said. "I suppose our bodies will be atrociously but not unidentifiably mutilated, to further enrage the public," he added placidly. "If I get out of this carnate, I'm going to pay somebody off for it."

After a few minutes, there was more shouting of: "Assassins' Truce!" from the descent tube. The two Assassins, Erarno and Kirzol, emerged, dragging the gamekeeper, Tarnod, between them. The upper-servant's face was bloody,

and his jaw seemed to be broken. Sarnax followed, carrying a long hunting pistol in his hand.

"Here he is!" he announced. "He fired during Assassins' Truce; he's subject to Assassins' Justice!"

He nodded to the others. They threw the gamekeeper forward on the floor, and Sarnax shot him through the head, then tossed the pistol down beside him. "Any more of these people who violate the decencies will be treated similarly," he promised.

"Thank you, Sarnax," Dirzed spoke up. "But we lost an Assassin: discarnating this lackey won't equalize that. We think you should retire one of your number."

"That at least, Dirzed; wait a moment."

The three Assassins conferred at some length. Then Sarnax hooked fingers and clapped shoulders with his companions.

"See you in the next reincarnation, brothers," he told them, walking toward the gun-room door, where Verkan Vall, Dalla and Dirzed stood. "I'm joining you people. You had two Assassins when the parley began, you'll have two when the shooting starts."

Verkan Vall looked at Dirzed in some surprise. Hadron Dalla's Assassin nodded.

"He's entitled to do that, Lord Virzal; the Assassins' code provides for such changes of allegiance."

"Welcome, Sarnax," Verkan Vall said, hooking fingers with him. "I hope we'll all be together when this is over."

"We will be," Sarnax assured him cheerfully. "Discarnate. We won't get out of this in the body, Lord Virzal."

A submachine-gun hammered from above, the bullets lashing the fountain pool; the water actually steamed, so great was their velocity.

"All right!" a voice called down. "Assassins' Truce is over!"

Another burst of automatic fire smashed out the lights at the bottom of the ascent tube. Dirzed and Dalla struggled across the room, pushing a heavy steel cabinet between them; Verkan Vall, who was holding Olirzon's submachine-gun, moved aside to allow them to drop it on edge in the open doorway, then wedged the door half-shut against it. Sarnax came over, bringing rifles, hunting pistols, and ammunition.

"What's the situation, up there?" Verkan Vall asked him. "What force have they, and why did they turn against us?"

"Lord Virzal!" Dirzed objected, scandalized. "You have no right to ask Sarnax to betray confidences!"

Sarnax spat against the door. "In the face of Jirzyn of Starpha!" he said. "And in the face of his _zortan_ mother, and of his father, whoever he was! Dirzed, do not talk foolishly; one does not speak of betraying betrayers." He turned to Verkan Vall. "They have three menservants of the family of Starpha; your Assassin, Olirzon, discarnated the other three. There is one of Prince Jirzyn's poor relations, named Girzad. There are three other men, Volitionalist precinct

workers, who came with Girzad, and four Assassins, the three who were here, and one who came with Girzad. Eleven, against the three of us."

"The four of us, Sarnax," Dalla corrected. She had buckled on a hunting pistol, and had a light deer rifle under her arm.

Something moved at the bottom of the descent tube. Verkan Vall gave it a short burst, though it was probably only a dummy, dropped to draw fire.

"The four of us, Lady Dallona," Sarnax agreed. "As to your other Assassin, the one who stayed in the airboat, I don't know how he fared. You see, about twenty minutes ago, this Girzad arrived in an airboat, with an Assassin and these three Volitionalist workers. Erarno and I were at the top of the dome when he came in. He told us that he had orders from Prince Jirzyn to discarnate the Lady Dallona and Dirzed at once. Tarnod, the gamekeeper"—Sarnax spat ceremoniously against the door again—"told him you were here, and that Marnik was one of your men. He was going to shoot Marnik at once, but Erarno and I and his Assassin stopped him. We warned Marnik about the change in the situation, according to the code, expecting Marnik to go down here and join you. Instead, he lifted the airboat, zoomed over Girzad's boat, and let go a rocket blast, setting Girzad's boat on fire. Well, that was a hostile act, so we all fired after him. We must have hit something, because the boat went down, trailing smoke, about ten miles away. Girzad got another airboat out of the hangar and he and his Assassin started after your man. About that time, your Assassin, Olirzon—happy reincarnation to him—came up, and the Starpha servants fired at him, and he fired back and discarnated two of them, and then jumped down the descent tube. One of the servants jumped after him; I found his body at the bottom when I came down to warn you formally. You know what happened after that."

"But why did Prince Jirzyn order our discarnation?" Dalla wanted to know. "Was it to blame the Statisticalists with it?"

Sarnax, about to answer, broke off suddenly and began firing at the opening of the ascent tube with a hunting pistol.

"I got him," he said, in a pleased tone. "That was Erarno; he was always playing tricks with the tubes, climbing down against negative gravity and up against positive gravity. His body will float up to the top—Why, Lady Dallona, that was only part of it. You didn't hear about the big scandal, on the newscast, then?"

"We didn't have it on. What scandal?"

Sarnax laughed. "Oh, the very father and family-head of all scandals! You ought to know about it, because you started it; that's why Prince Jirzyn wants you out of the body—You devised a process by which people could give themselves memory-recalls of previous reincarnations, didn't you? And distributed apparatus to do it with? And gave one set to young Tarnov, the son of Lord Tirzov of Fastor?"

Dalla nodded. Sarnax continued:

"Well, last evening, Tarnox of Fastor used his recall outfit, and what do you think? It seems that thirty years ago, in his last reincarnation, he was Jirzid of Starpha, Jirzyn's older brother. Jirzid was betrothed to the Lady Annitra of Zabna. Well, his younger brother was carrying on a clandestine affair with the Lady Annitra, and he also wanted the title of Prince and family-head of Starpha. So he bribed this fellow Tarnod, whom I had the pleasure of discarnating, and who was an underservant here at the hunting lodge. Between them, they shot Jirzid during a boar hunt. An accident, of course. So Jirzyn married the Lady Annitra, and when old Prince Jarnid, his father, discarnated a year later, he succeeded to the title. And immediately, Tarnod was made head gamekeeper here."

"What did I tell you, Lord Virzal? I knew that son of a *zortan* had something on Jirzyn of Starpha!" Dirzed exclaimed. "A nice family, this of Starpha!"

"Well, that's not the end of it," Sarnax continued. "This morning, Tarnov of Fastor, late Jirzid of Starpha, went before the High Court of Estates and entered suit to change his name to Jirzid of Starpha and laid claim to the title of Starpha family-head. The case has just been entered, so there's been no hearing, but there's the blazes of an argument among all the nobles about it—some are claiming that the individuality doesn't change from one reincarnation to the next, and others claiming that property and titles should pass along the line of physical descent, no matter what individuality has reincarnated into what body. They're the ones who want the Lady Dallona discarnated and her discoveries suppressed. And there's talk about revising the entire system of estate-ownership and estate-inheritance. Oh, it's an utter obscenity of a business!"

"This," Verkan Vall told Dalla, "is something we will not emphasize when we get home." That was as close as he dared come to it, but she caught his meaning. The working of major changes in out-time social structures was not viewed with approval by the Paratime Commission on the First Level. "*If* we get home," he added. Then an idea occurred to him.

"Dirzed, Sarnax; this place must have been used by the leaders of the Volitionalists for top-level conferences. Is there a secret passage anywhere?"

Sarnax shook his head. "Not from here. There is one, on the floor above, but they control it. And even if there were one down here, they would be guarding the outlet."

"That's what I was counting on. I'd hoped to simulate an escape that way, and then make a rush up the regular tubes." Verkan Vall shrugged. "I suppose Marnik's our only chance. I hope he got away safely."

"He was going for help? I was surprised that an Assassin would desert his client; I should have thought of that," Sarnax said. "Well, even if he got down carnate, and if Girzad didn't catch him, he'd still be afoot ten miles from the nearest city unit. That gives us a little

chance—about one in a thousand."

"Is there any way they can get at us, except by those tubes?" Dalla asked.

"They could cut a hole in the floor, or burn one through," Sarnax replied. "They have plenty of thermite. They could detonate a charge of explosives over our heads, or clear out of the dome and drop one down the well. They could use lethal gas or radiodust, but their Assassins wouldn't permit such illegal methods. Or they could shoot sleep-gas down at us, and then come down and cut our throats at their leisure."

"We'll have to get out of this room, then," Verkan Vall decided. "They know we've barricaded ourselves in here; this is where they'll attack. So we'll patrol the perimeter of the well; we'll be out of danger from above if we keep close to the wall. And we'll inspect all the rooms on this floor for evidence of cutting through from above."

Sarnax nodded. "That's sense, Lord Virzal. How about the lifter tubes?"

"We'll have to barricade them. Sarnax, you and Dirzed know the layout of this place better than the Lady Dallona or I; suppose you two check the rooms, while we cover the tubes and the well," Verkan Vall directed. "Come on, now."

They pushed the door wide-open and went out past the cabinet. Hugging the wall, they began a slow circuit of the well, Verkan Vall in the lead with the submachine-gun, then Sarnax and Dirzed, the former with a heavy boar-rifle and the latter with a hunting pistol in each hand, and Hadron Dalla brought up in the rear with her rifle. It was she who noticed a movement along the rim of the balcony above and snapped a shot at it; there was a crash above, and a shower of glass and plastic and metal fragments rattled on the pavement of the court. Somebody had been trying to lower a scanner or a visiplate-pickup, or something of the sort; the exact nature of the instrument was not evident from the wreckage Dalla's bullet had made of it.

The rooms Dirzed and Sarnax entered were all quiet; nobody seemed to be attempting to cut through the ceiling, fifteen feet above. They dragged furniture from a couple of rooms, blocking the openings of the lifter tubes, and continued around the well until they had reached the gun room again.

Dirzed suggested that they move some of the weapons and ammunition stored there to Prince Jirzyn's private apartment, halfway around to the lifter tubes, so that another place of refuge would be stocked with munitions in event of their being driven from the gun room.

Leaving him on guard outside, Verkan Vall, Dalla and Sarnax entered the gun room and began gathering weapons and boxes of ammunition. Dalla finished packing her game bag with the recorded data and notes of her experiments. Verkan Vall selected four more of the heavy hunting pistols, more accurate than his shoulder-holster weapon or the dead Olirzon's belt arm, and capable of either full or semi-automatic fire. Sarnax chose a couple more boar rifles. Dalla slung her bag of re-

corded notes, and another bag of ammunition, and secured another deer rifle. They carried this accumulation of munitions to the private apartments of Prince Jirzyn, dumping everything in the middle of the drawing room, except the bag of notes, from which Dalla refused to separate herself.

"Maybe we'd better put some stuff over in one of the rooms on the other side of the well," Dirzed suggested. "They haven't really begun to come after us; when they do, we'll probably be attacked from two or three directions at once."

They returned to the gun room, casting anxious glances at the edge of the balcony above and at the barricade they had erected across the openings to the lifter tubes. Verkan Vall was not satisfied with this last; it looked to him as though they had provided a breastwork for somebody to fire on them from, more than anything else.

He was about to step around the cabinet which partially blocked the gun-room door when he glanced up, and saw a six-foot circle on the ceiling turning slowly brown. There was a smell of scorched plastic. He grabbed Sarnax by the arm and pointed.

"Thermite," the Assassin whispered. "The ceiling's got six inches of spaceship-insulation between it and the floor above; it'll take them a few minutes to burn through it." He stooped and pushed on the barricade, shoving it into the room. "Keep back; they'll probably drop a grenade or so through, first, before they jump down. If we're quick, we can get a couple of them."

Dirzed and Sarnax crouched, one at either side of the door, with weapons ready. Verkan Vall and Dalla had been ordered, rather peremptorily, to stay behind them; in a place of danger, an Assassin was obliged to shield his client. Verkan Vall, unable to see what was going on inside the room, kept his eyes and his gun muzzle on the barricade across the openings to the lifter tubes, the erection of which he was now regretting as a major tactical error.

Inside the gun room, there was a sudden crash, as the circle of thermite burned through and a section of ceiling dropped out and hit the floor. Instantly, Dirzed flung himself back against Verkan Vall, and there was a tremendous explosion inside, followed by another and another. A second or so passed, then Dirzed, leaning around the corner of the door, began firing rapidly into the room. From the other side of the door, Sarnax began blazing away with his rifle. Verkan Vall kept his position, covering the lifter tubes.

Suddenly, from behind the barricade, a blue-white gun flash leaped into being, and a pistol banged. He sprayed the opening between a couch and a section of bookcase from whence it had come, releasing his trigger as the gun rose with the recoil, squeezing and releasing and squeezing again. Then he jumped to his feet.

"Come on, the other place; hurry!" he ordered.

Sarnax swore in exasperation. "Help me with her, Dirzed!" he im-

plored.

Verkan Vall turned his head, to see the two Assassins drag Dalla to her feet and hustle her away from the gun room; she was quite senseless, and they had to drag her between them. Verkan Vall gave a quick glance into the gun room; two of the Starpha servants and a man in rather flashy civil dress were lying on the floor, where they had been shot as they had jumped down from above. He saw a movement at the edge of the irregular, smoking, hole in the ceiling, and gave it a short burst, then fired another at the exit from the descent tube. Then he took to his heels and followed the Assassins and Hadron Dalla into Prince Jirzyn's apartment.

As he ran through the open door, the Assassins were letting Dalla down into a chair; they instantly threw themselves into the work of barricading the doorway so as to provide cover and at the same time allow them to fire out into the central well.

For an instant, as he bent over her, he thought Dalla had been killed, an assumption justified by his knowledge of the deadliness of Akor-Neb bullets. Then he saw her eye-lids flicker. A moment later, he had the explanation of her escape. The bullet had hit the game bag at her side; it was full of spools of metal tape, in metal cases, and notes in written form, pyrographed upon sheets of plastic ring fastened into metal binders. Because of their extreme velocity, Akor-Neb bullets were sure killers when they struck animal tissue, but for the same reason, they had very poor penetration on hard objects. The alloy-steel tape, and the steel spools and spool cases, and the notebook binders, had been enough to shatter the little bullet into splinters of magnesium-nickel alloy, and the stout leather back of the game bag had stopped all of these. But the impact, even distributed as it had been through the contents of the bag, had been enough to knock the girl unconscious.

He found a bottle of some sort of brandy and a glass on a serving table nearby and poured her a drink, holding it to her lips. She spluttered over the first mouthful, then took the glass from him and sipped the rest.

"What happened?" she asked. "I thought those bullets were sure death."

"Your notes. The bullet hit the bag. Are you all right, now?"

She finished the brandy. "I think so." She put a hand into the game bag and brought out a snarled and tangled mess of steel tape. "Oh, _blast_! That stuff was important; all the records on the preliminary auto-recall experiments." She shrugged. "Well, it wouldn't have been worth much more if I'd stopped that bullet, myself." She slipped the strap over her shoulder and started to rise.

As she did, a bedlam of firing broke out, both from the two Assassins at the door and from outside. They both hit the floor and crawled out of line of the partly-open door; Verkan Vall recovered his submachine-gun, which he had set down beside Dalla's chair. Sarnax was firing with his rifle at some target in the direction of the lifter tubes; Dirzed lay slumped over the barricade, and

one glance at his crumpled figure was enough to tell Verkan Vall that he was dead.

"You fill magazines for us," he told Dalla, then crawled to Dirzed's place at the door. "What happened, Sarnax?"

"They shoved over the barricade at the lifter tubes and came out into the well. I got a couple, they got Dirzed, and now they're holed up in rooms all around the circle. They—Aah!" He fired three shots, quickly, around the edge of the door. "That stopped that." The Assassin crouched to insert a fresh magazine into his rifle.

Verkan Vall risked one eye around the corner of the doorway, and as he did, there was a red flash and a dull roar, unlike the blue flashes and sharp cracking reports of the pistols and rifles, from the doorway of the gun room. He wondered, for a split second, if it might be one of the fowling pieces he had seen there, and then something whizzed past his head and exploded with a soft *plop* behind him. Turning, he saw a pool of gray vapor beginning to spread in the middle of the room. Dalla must have got a breath of it, for she was slumped over the chair from which she had just risen.

Dropping the submachine-gun and gulping a lungful of fresh air from outside, Verkan Vall rushed to her, caught her by the heels, and dragged her into Prince Jirzyn's bedroom, beyond. Leaving her in the middle of the floor, he took another deep breath and returned to the drawing room, where Sarnax was already overcome by the sleep-gas.

He saw the serving table from which he had got the brandy, and dragged it over to the bedroom door, overturning it and laying it across the doorway, its legs in the air. Like most Akor-Neb serving tables, it had a gravity-counteraction unit under it; he set this for double minus-gravitation and snapped it on. As it was now above the inverted table, the table did not rise, but a tendril, of sleep-gas, curling toward it, bent upward and drifted away from the doorway. Satisfied that he had made a temporary barrier against the sleep-gas, Verkan Vall secured Dalla's hunting pistol and spare magazines and lay down at the bedroom door.

For some time, there was silence outside. Then the besiegers evidently decided that the sleep-gas attack had been a success. An Assassin, wearing a gas mask and carrying a submachine-gun, appeared in the doorway, and behind him came a tall man in a tan tunic, similarly masked. They stepped into the room and looked around.

Knowing that he would be shooting over a two hundred percent negative gravitation-field, Verkan Vall aimed for the Assassin's belt-buckle and squeezed. The bullet caught him in the throat. Evidently the bullet had not only been lifted in the negative gravitation, but lifted point-first and deflected upward. He held his front sight just above the other man's knee, and hit him in the chest.

As he fired, he saw a wisp of gas come sliding around the edge of the inverted table. There was silence outside, and for an instant, he was tempted to abandon his post and go to the bath-

room, back of the bedroom, for wet towels to improvise a mask. Then, when he tried to crawl backward, he could not. There was an impression of distant shouting which turned to a roaring sound in his head. He tried to lift his pistol, but it slipped from his fingers.

When consciousness returned, he was lying on his back, and something cold and rubbery was pressing into his face. He raised his arms to fight off whatever it was, and opened his eyes, to find that he was staring directly at the red oval and winged bullet of the Society of Assassins. A hand caught his wrist as he reached for the small pistol under his arm. The pressure on his face eased.

"It's all right, Lord Virzal," a voice came to him. "Assassins' Truce!"

He nodded stupidly and repeated the words. "Assassins' Truce; I won't shoot. What happened?"

Then he sat up and looked around. Prince Jirzyn's bedchamber was full of Assassins. Dalla, recovering from her touch of sleep-gas, was sitting groggily in a chair, while five or six of them fussed around her, getting in each others' way, handing her drinks, chaffing her wrists, holding damp cloths on her brow. That was standard procedure, when any group of males thought Dalla needed any help. Another Assassin, beside the bed, was putting away an oxygen-mask outfit, and the Assassin who had prevented Verkan Vall from drawing his pistol was his own follower, Marnik. And Klarnood, the Assassin-President, was sitting on the foot of the bed, smoking one of Prince Jirzyn's monogrammed and crested cigarettes critically.

Verkan Vall looked at Marnik, and then at Klarnood, and back to Marnik.

"You got through," he said. "Good work, Marnik; I thought they'd downed you."

"They did; I had to crash-land in the woods. I went about a mile on foot, and then I found a man and woman and two children, hiding in one of these little log rain shelters. They had an airboat, a good one. It seemed that rioting had broken out in the city unit where they lived, and they'd taken to the woods till things quieted down again. I offered them Assassins' protection if they'd take me to Assassins' Hall, and they did."

"By luck, I was in when Marnik arrived," Klarnood took over. "We brought three boatloads of men, and came here at once. Just as we got here, two boatloads of Starpha dependents arrived; they tried to give us an argument, and we discarnated the lot of them. Then we came down here, crying Assassins' Truce. One of the Starpha Assassins, Kirzol, was still carnate; he told us what had been going on." The President-General's face-became grim. "You know, I take a rather poor view of Prince Jirzyn's procedure in this matter, not to mention that of his underlings. I'll have to speak to him about this. Now, how about you and the Lady Dallona? What do you intend doing?"

"We're getting out of here," Verkan Vall said. "I'd like air transport and protection as far as Ghamma, to the establishment of the family of Zorda. Brarnend of Zorda has a private space

yacht; he'll get us to Venus."

Klarnood gave a sigh of obvious relief. "I'll have you and the Lady Dallona airborne and off for Ghamma as soon as you wish," he promised. "I will, frankly, be delighted to see the last of both of you. The Lady Dallona has started a fire here at Darsh that won't burn out in a half-century, and who knows what it may consume." He was interrupted by a heaving shock that made the underground dome dwelling shake like a light airboat in turbulence. Even eighty feet under the ground, they could hear a continued crashing roar. It was an appreciable interval before the sound and the shock ceased.

For an instant, there was silence, and then an excited bedlam of shouting broke from the Assassins in the room: Klarnood's face was frozen in horror.

"That was a fission bomb!" he exclaimed. "The first one that has been exploded on this planet in hostility in a thousand years!" He turned to Verkan Vall. "If you feel well enough to walk, Lord Virzal, come with us. I must see what's happened."

They hurried from the room and went streaming up the ascent tube to the top of the dome. About forty miles away, to the south, Verkan Vall saw the sinister thing that he had seen on so many other time-lines, in so many other paratime sectors—a great pillar of varicolored fire-shot smoke, rising to a mushroom head fifty thousand feet above.

"Well, that's it," Klarnood said sadly. "That is civil war."

"May I make a suggestion, Assassin-President?" Verkan Vall asked. "I understand that Assassins' Truce is binding even upon non-Assassins; is that correct?"

"Well, not exactly; it's generally kept by such non-Assassins as want to remain in their present reincarnations, though."

"That's what I meant. Well, suppose you declare a general, planet-wide Assassins' Truce in this political war, and make the leaders of both parties responsible for keeping it. Publish lists of the top two or three thousand Statisticalists and Volitionalists, starting with Mirzark of Bashad and Prince Jirzyn of Starpha, and inform them that they will be assassinated, in order, if the fighting doesn't cease."

"Well!" A smile grew on Klarnood's face. "Lord Virzal, my thanks; a good suggestion. I'll try it. And furthermore, I'll withdraw all Assassin protection permanently from anybody involved in political activity, and forbid any Assassin to accept any retainer connected with political factionalism. It's about time our members stopped discarnating each other in these political squabbles." He pointed to the three airboats drawn up on the top of the dome; speedy black craft, bearing the red oval and winged bullet. "Take your choice, Lord Virzal. I'll lend you a couple of my men, and you'll be in Ghamma in three hours." He hooked fingers and clapped shoulders with Verkan Vall, bent over Dalla's hand. "I still like you, Lord Virzal, and I have seldom met a more charming lady than you, Lady Dallona. But I sincerely

hope I never see either of you again."

The ship for Dhergabar was driving north and west; at seventy thousand feet, it was still daylight, but the world below was wrapping itself in darkness. In the big visiscreens, which served in lieu of the windows which could never have withstood the pressure and friction heat of the ship's speed, the sun was sliding out of sight over the horizon to port. Verkan Vall and Dalla sat together, watching the blazing western sky—the sky of their own First Level time-line.

"I blame myself terribly, Vall," Dalla was saying. "And I didn't mean any of them the least harm. All I was interested in was learning the facts. I know, that sounds like 'I didn't know it was loaded,' but—"

"It sounds to me like those Fourth Level Europo-American Sector physicists who are giving themselves guilt-complexes because they designed an atomic bomb," Verkan Vall replied. "All you were interested in was learning the facts. Well, as a scientist, that's all you're supposed to be interested in. You don't have to worry about any social or political implications. People have to learn to live with newly-discovered facts; if they don't, they die of them."

"But, Vall; that sounds dreadfully irresponsible—"

"Does it? You're worrying about the results of your reincarnation memory-recall discoveries, the shootings and riotings and the bombing we saw." He touched the pommel of Olirzon's knife, which he still wore. "You're no more guilty of that than the man who forged this blade is guilty of the death of Marnark of Bashad; if he'd never lived, I'd have killed Marnark with some other knife somebody else made. And what's more, you can't know the results of your discoveries. All you can see is a thin film of events on the surface of an immediate situation, so you can't say whether the long-term results will be beneficial or calamitous.

"Take this Fourth Level Europo-American atomic bomb, for example. I choose that because we both know that sector, but I could think of a hundred other examples in other paratime areas. Those people, because of deforestation, bad agricultural methods and general mismanagement, are eroding away their arable soil at an alarming rate. At the same time, they are breeding like rabbits. In other words, each successive generation has less and less food to divide among more and more people, and, for inherited traditional and superstitious reasons, they refuse to adopt any rational program of birth-control and population-limitation.

"But, fortunately, they now have the atomic bomb, and they are developing radioactive poisons, weapons of mass-effect. And their racial, nationalistic and ideological conflicts are rapidly reaching the explosion point. A series of all-out atomic wars is just what that sector needs, to bring their population down to their world's carrying capacity; in a century or so, the inventors of the atomic bomb will be hailed as the saviors of their species."

"But how about my work on the

Akor-Neb Sector?" Dalla asked. "It seems that my memory-recall technique is more explosive than any fission bomb. I've laid the train for a century-long reign of anarchy!"

"I doubt that; I think Klarnood will take hold, now that he has committed himself to it. You know, in spite of his sanguinary profession, he's the nearest thing to a real man of good will I've found on that sector. And here's something else you haven't considered. Our own First Level life expectancy is from four to five hundred years. That's the main reason why we've accomplished as much as we have. We have, individually, time to accomplish things. On the Akor-Neb Sector, a scientist or artist or scholar or statesman will grow senile and die before he's as old as either of us. But now, a young student of twenty or so can take one of your auto-recall treatments and immediately have available all the knowledge and experience gained in four or five previous lives. He can start where he left off in his last reincarnation. In other words, you've made those people time-binders, individually as well as racially. Isn't that worth the temporary discarnation of a lot of ward-heelers and plug-uglies, or even a few decent types like Dirzed and Olirzon? If it isn't, I don't know what scales of values you're using."

"Vall!" Dalla's eyes glowed with enthusiasm. "I never thought of that! And you said, 'temporary discarnation.' That's just what it is. Dirzed and Olirzon and the others aren't dead; they're just waiting, discarnate, between physical lives. You know, in the sacred writings of one of the Fourth Level peoples it is stated: 'Death is the last enemy.' By proving that death is just a cyclic condition of continued individual existence, these people have conquered their last enemy."

"Last enemy but one," Verkan Vall corrected. "They still have one enemy to go, an enemy within themselves. Call it semantic confusion, or illogic, or incomprehension, or just plain stupidity. Like Klarnood, stymied by verbal objections to something labeled 'political intervention.' He'd never have consented to use the power of his Society if he hadn't been shocked out of his inhibitions by that nuclear bomb. Or the Statisticalists, trying to create a classless order of society through a political program which would only result in universal servitude to an omnipotent government. Or the Volitionalist nobles, trying to preserve their hereditary feudal privileges, and now they can't even agree on a definition of the term 'hereditary.' Might they not recover all the silly prejudices of their past lives, along with the knowledge and wisdom?"

"But ... I thought you said—" Dalla was puzzled, a little hurt.

Verkan Vall's arm squeezed around her waist, and he laughed comfortingly.

"You see? Any sort of result is possible, good or bad. So don't blame yourself in advance for something you can't possibly estimate." An idea occurred to him, and he straightened in the seat. "Tell you what; if you people at Rhogom Foundation get the problem of discarnate paratime transposition

licked by then, let's you and I go back to the Akor-Neb Sector in about a hundred years and see what sort of a mess those people have made of things."

"A hundred years: that would be Year Twenty-Two of the next millennium. It's a date, Vall; we'll do it."

They bent to light their cigarettes together at his lighter. When they raised their heads again and got the flame glare out of their eyes, the sky was purple-black, dusted with stars, and dead ahead, spilling up over the horizon, was a golden glow—the lights of Dhergabar and home.